

NAULAKHA
(Tale of a Forgotten Township)

Bishad K. Mukherjee

NEW DELHI

The characters in this book are fictional. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental

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**To the Memory of
My brother Haridhan Mukherjee
and Aunt Suruchi Bala Devi**

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PREFACE

Waini as I saw it in the twenties and thirties was a flat virgin land dotted with hamlets of simple unsophisticated folks on the bank of the Burhi Gandak in the Tirhut Division of North Bihar. There they lived, the toiling masses, fighting a grim battle with unseen foes and uncontrollable elemental forces. They had, alas, a brief existence. They flowered for a while and then faded away. All good things in life have a brief existence. This holds good for both men and places. When men disappear places also wither, or atleast they change, sometimes beyond recognition. Waini has not only withered, it has vanished. Vainly would some one scan the Railway Time Table to locate it on the Railway circuit. But ask some octogenarians and they would surely vouchsafe that there indeed was a Railway Station called Waini. Trains coming from Barauni and going westward would stop for a while at Samastipur and then steam off towards Muzaffarpur. In between those two stations was a small chip of a station where on the lamp post one could read in the glimmering moonlight the letters ``WAINI'' etched in white. Only passenger trains stopped there and a few passengers disembarked. They were mostly turbaned farmers with a staff in hand and a load on head, winding their way through the foot-tracks towards a village some three miles away. As the trains thundered away on the shining slippery rails, Waini station relapsed in a deep slumber only to be awakened when the signal man struck a piece of rail, suspended from a wall, with an iron rod to signal the departure of the train from the next station in either direction. Thus Waini alternated between slumber and animation until that morning when some one in authority obliterated the discoloured letters on the lamp post and put up new ones which read ``PUSA ROAD''. Waini had disappeared from the Railway map.

The Burhi Gandak and the Bairia Dhaf were two landmarks of Waini country-side, whose serenity was, at the beginning of the present century, rudely intruded upon by the clatter of a thousand shovels, pick-axes and the ``het-het'' of hundreds of bullocks as the ploughmen systematically upturned the virgin soil and levelled the ground for builders to work upon. Within few years there arose in the heart of that virgin soil a gigantic structure which the local people called NAULAKHA. It was said that a sum of rupees nine lakhs was spent in building the edifice and hence the appellation of Naulakha.

Within the Naulakha campus lived some five thousand people drawn from different parts of the country. Besides, there was a sizeable floating population from neighbouring villages. While the Indian Babus and the British Sahebs had a culture of their own the peripheral villages had a

different life-style which was characterised by simplicity and ruggedness. The villagers had their overlords, zemindars, who formed a class by themselves. But not all zemindars were of the same hue. Some were imbued with a high sense of idealism. Some others spent a life of gaiety and pleasure. A few were gay revellers who flourished under the protective canopy of the British Raj.

That was an age of revolution—both violent and non-violent. That was also an age of exploitation. While the under-privileged sections of the society—the Harijans—suffered in silence, the tribe of unscrupulous contractors, the sycophants of the Raj, flourished and prospered.

Situated at a distance of twenty-two miles from Waini, Muzaffarpur was then, as now, a busy bustling town, the headquarters of the district. The town had an old age charm about her but despite her antiquity exuded a remarkable freshness and vigour. Alongside the Purani Bazar and the red-light areas of Chaturbhuj Sthan, arose the structures of brick and mortar which extended upto Kalyani, Motijheel and Saraiyaganj. A sharp bend from Aghoria Bazar led the pedestrian to that marvellous structure in red and white, the Greer Bhumiar Brahmin College (now Langat Singh College), which was my Alma Mater.

Muzaffarpur was a city of commoners, of lawyers and mukhtiyars, of businessmen and small traders, of thugs and sadhus; in fact every description of homo-sapiens which inhabited an oriental city. Waini and Muzaffarpur were like two faces of the same coin. People locomoted from the village to the town with comparative ease. Thanks to the railway network and the near perfect *surkhi*—strewn motorable road, there arose a bondage, a kinship between the rural Waini and the urban Muzaffarpur. The characters of this book, therefore, are the inhabitants of the *gaon* and the *shahar* (the village and the town).

Every beginning has an end. The Naulakha perished in the Bihar earthquake of 1934. Not a stone now remains to tell about its pristine grandeur. But the Burhi Gandak, on whose bank it was situated, still flows on unmindful of the throbbing, pulsating township that has now passed into a limbo of forgetfulness. However, place names like Dighra, Mahmuda and Bhuskaul still exist.

I shall be failing in my duty if I do not acknowledge the assistance rendered to me by my wife, Sabitri. It is she who encouraged me to write this narrative on the basis of my experiences, however commonplace, gathered during my childhood and adolescent years.

I

DOWN THE MEMORY LANE

August 31, 1962

The Lucknow Express was running inordinately late. Seated in a first class compartment, Benu fidgeted nervously as he unfolded the telegram in his hand. It had been delivered to him at office at seventeen hours on the previous day, the 30th August, 1962. A very quick transmission no doubt considering the fact that the telegram was despatched at eight in the morning from his native place—Muzaffarpur. "Dadi seriously ill. Come at once", that was the message sent by his nephew, Somnath. Dadi was no other than Benu's foster-mother, whom Benu affectionately called Mejoma. Although a foster-mother, Benu knew her as his mother, his own mother having died when he was a toddler of two years. In fact it was Mejoma, who had reared up Benu after his mother's death.

Benu wondered whether he would be able to see his Mejoma alive. She was dying. In her dying hours she must be yearning to see him. For, Benu was her youngest protegee, her *enfant terrible*. She loved him and hated him. Loved him for his helplessness, his deprivations, his attachment. Hated him because of his obstinacy, his unpredictable moods, his infantile pranks, which made her weep at times. Benu recollected that in the most critical phases of his life his Mejoma was always by his side. The memories of those six months in the Hillcrest sanatorium of Gethia, Nainital, where Benu lay in a solitary cottage with Mejoma, to recuperate after an attack of pleurisy, were vivid in his mind. To his youthful mind his Mejoma appeared taller, tougher than the pine-topped crests of the Kumaon hills. She never faltered. She faced the rigours of the hills with a courage and determination which the attending physicians could not fail to appreciate. "Your nursing is wonderful, madam", the stooping Dr. Dalal once had remarked when Mejoma had helped Benu to sit up for the first time. What a joy beamed in her face when Benu came down from the Hills fully cured. His Mejoma had, as it were, returned from the battlefield triumphant, exultant.

That same Mejoma was now languishing. Thoughts moved with a kaleidoscopic swiftness. Forty years appeared to be capsuled in one transient moment and that moment was painful.

Death was knocking at the door.

Benu looked at his watch. It was already six and the train had not yet reached Shahjahanpur. This meant that by the time he reached Lucknow his connecting train—the Avadh Tirhut Mail of the O.T. Railway—would have left. He prayed to God that somehow the train would make up the delay. Still three hours to go. There was hardly anything that he could do except look through the window at the passing fields interspersed with thickly grown cactuses and wild stunted date palms. Life was like the cactus, Benu thought. The transient joys of life were like the wild dates. They were bitter sweet in taste. All that mattered was love, pure self-less undying love. But how many could bestow it and how many were fortunate enough to bask in the light of that love? Benu thought that he was one of the fortunate few who could, without asking for it, get that love—the love of a mother for a child although he lost his own mother in infancy. His Mejoma had filled the vacuum in his life. He never did feel that he was bereft of a mother of his own. There were moments, of course, when he was chagrined by Mejoma's stern methods of disciplining the wayward children. Enough pain had he caused her by his obstinacy, by his sudden fits of anger and by his impetuosity. But Mejoma had borne it all. She never did complain. Although living in penury with the rest of the family members, she never asked a thing for herself. Benu remembered that after he had become a civil servant—a very coveted position indeed—he had written to Mejoma asking her to come and live with him. But Mejoma didn't come. As a devout Hindu lady she couldn't dream of abandoning her husband's home.

The trail of thoughts broke off as the train reached the platform of Lucknow Junction and came to a halt. With a lightning speed Benu clutched his bag, jumped off the train, and gave a loud cry—"Mejoma". Within minutes he berthed himself in a compartment of the Avadh Tirhut Mail which inexplicably enough was still standing on the platform. Some unseen hand was surely guiding the movement of men and things.

Sadness was writ large on Benu's face. One after another the stations flew past him. Gonda. Manakpur. Basti. Gorakhpur. Bhatni. Sivan. The locale was familiar. He was now in his native Bihar. Someone sitting in the adjoining berth asked:

"How far are you going, Sir."

"To Muzaffarpur," Benu said almost laconically. He was in no mood to enter into a conversation.

"I'm also going that way," the co-passenger said. "Not to Muzaffarpur but a little further."

"Where to?," Benu asked out of sheer curiosity.

"To Mahmuda village. I'll get down at Pusa Road."

Suddenly Benu sat up with a start. Pusa Road? Waini? Mahmuda? A host of fleeting images crowded his mind. He looked at his co-passenger. He was a handsome youngman and from his outfit Benu could gather that he was a doctor.

"Do you live there?" he asked.

"Yes. My name is Viswanath Mishra. I'm a doctor in the Ramanand Mishra charitable hospital."

The flood-gates of memory suddenly opened with a surging wave of emotion. Benu took time to control himself.

"Is Mishraji no more?", Benu feebly asked.

"He died in 1948. Did you know him?"

"Not only knew him but loved him. I lived in that side, in Naulakha. That was before the earthquake."

"What is your name, Sir, if you don't mind."

"Binod. I was called Benu in my childhood".

"Benu? My grand-uncle used to tell me about a small boy called Benu, who lived in Naulakha colony. His brother was one Mr. Shibdas."

"Yes, that's correct," said Benu. He found it difficult to control his emotions.

"Could you tell me about Mishraji's daughter. Sujata was her name."

"She is in Bettiah with her husband—Dr. Amitabha Banerjee. Her son is now studying for the M.B.B.S in Patna Medical college."

"And her mother, Sumitra Devi?"

"She didn't live long. She chose to remain at Mahmuda, her husband's place of work. She was the maternal figure there, a beacon of hope and encouragement to the impoverished peasants of Mahmuda. She died suddenly in 1950 due to acute peritonitis."

"Peritonitis?" The word escaped from Benu's lips almost involuntarily.

"Yes. But why"... Dr. Mishra looked at Benu's face. "Why are you agitated?"

Benu calmly answered: "My mother also died of peritonitis. I don't remember her face. She died when I was only two-year old."

Chupra. Sonapur. Hazipur. Three big stations glimmered for a moment and then melted into the darkness of the night one by one.

Muzaffarpur was approaching. Benu collected his belongings and then waited for the train to halt. Suddenly a thought crossed his mind. He looked at Dr. Mishra and asked:

"Are you related to Shri Ramanand Mishra?"

"He was my grand-uncle. My, father, Sudhakar Mishra, was his nephew."

"And could you tell me what happened to Shakuntala Devi of Bhuskaul?"

"She is now a leading social worker in Patna."

"Please give my regards to her if you meet her, and my best wishes to Sujata. I don't think I'll be able to meet them."

Muzaffarpur Station was in blaze of light when Benu alighted. He hailed a rickshaw. "To Kachisarai. Near the pond," he murmured. He looked at his watch. It was past eleven. The rickshaw wended its way through Motijheel, Kalyani, past the Kalyani junction, to Kachisarai and then turned towards a lane.

There was darkness all around. Benu's heart thumped as he approached the dark dismal building where his Mejoma lived with Somnath. He tiptoed to the verandah. There was no sound. A silence, a deadly silence, prevailed in the entire premises. He tapped on a side door. Slowly it opened. There was his nephew Somnath peeping through the half-opened door. He shouted: "Chotokaka has come". Benu looked at his face. He could not muster courage to ask if his Dadi (grandma) was alive. He stared in silence. His sister-in-law was already up. She said: "Ma is alive but unconscious. She regains her senses by fits and starts. Come have a look."

Benu went to the adjoining room. There lay prostrate on the bed his Mejoma, almost in a coma. Breathing was irregular. A putrid smell emanated from the patient's body. That was the smell of death, thought Benu. Is this the sight for which he had journeyed some six hundred miles all the way from Delhi? Could he not be favoured with a sign of recognition in her pallid eyes, now half-closed, waiting for the ultimate? Thoughts like these crossed Benu's mind as his sister-in-law bowed before Mejoma and loudly spoke into her ears: "Ma, Ma, see who was come." For some moments there was no response; but suddenly Mejoma's lips quivered, her eyes half-opened and she looked up. Benu bent over the listless body hoping to catch a glimpse of her open eyes. Mejoma stirred. A miasma which had gathered in her eyes seemed to clear up. She saw Benu and said: "Benu. Benu has come." Then she closed her eyes again. That was enough consolation for Benu. His journey was not in vain after all. After a brief talk with his nephew about the condition of the patient, Benu retired to bed after mid-night. At five in the morning he was awakened by a frantic call from his sister-in-law. Benu rushed to Mejoma's side. There she lay on bed dead and frigid.

She must have died after midnight. "She was waiting for you," his sister-in-law said. "She's died in peace. She loved you dearly."

When the funeral pyre was lit up on the bank of the Ganga at Paleza Ghat, some forty miles away from Muzaffarpur, Benu remembered the words uttered by his departed eldest brother, whom he called Dada, at Varanasi some thirty years ago: "Mejoma we'll take you to the Ganga when you die. You've done so much for our family since our mother's death."

When Benu was leaving Muzaffarpur after completion of the mourning period and the obligatory post-funeral ceremonies his sister-in-law handed over to him a small casket wrapped in a faded velvet cloth. Inside there was a miniature photograph taken by Calcutta Art Studio of a young man in breeches and hunting boots. Although faded the contours of the person were prominent enough. There was a printed line at the bottom which read: "Anadi Charan Banerjee, B. 1870". Along with the photograph was a printed booklet whose title read "Babus of Baranagar: Early History". Benu turned over the pages to look for the author's name. There was none. Only the letters "A.C." were printed at the bottom of the title page. That left no doubt about the authorship of the booklet.

As his train sped through the alluvial plains of Bihar and U.P. Benu opened the pages of the diary and was soon absorbed in a tale hitherto unknown to him.

II

CHANDELIERS AND ALL THAT : DIARY OF ANADI CHARAN

"In the turbulent days of Bengal following the battle of Plassey in 1757, there had come to Murshidabad—the seat of the Nawabs—a Kan-yakubja (modern Kanouj) Brahmin in his late fifties called Ram Ram. He was proficient in Farsi and Urdu and in his time he became proficient in Bengali too. After the fall of Nawab Siraj-ud-daula, Mir Zafar had ascended the Royal *gaddi* (throne) but power rested with the Nawab's first wife, Munnee Begum. The said Ram Ram had somehow caught the attention of the Naib Subedar and Munnee Begum and was given a job in the Royal Kutchery (office). To celebrate Mir Zafar's ascendancy to the Royal throne, a three-day festival was held at Murshidabad. The Royal Treasury was, at the command of the Nawab, thrown open for bestowing gifts to the faithful and trusted employees. Some got cash awards, some were given landed property, while some others were given titles and decorations. At the end of the three-day festivities, the Naib Subedar asked in the presence of the Nawab: "Is there anyone who did not get Nawab's favours?" With folded hands Ram Ram stood up and said: "Huzoor, I am Ram Ram by name, by caste Brahmin, and a poor employee in your Majesty's Kutchery. I am yet to receive your Majesty's blessings". The Nawab looked at the drooping figure of the applicant and then ordered: "He may be given a thousand mohors." Ram Ram prostrated before the Nawab and said: "Huzoor, money will come and go as fast as the water in the Ganga. If your Majesty so pleases he may, in his infinite kindness, bestow on me some landed property so that my descendants might be free from wants." The Nawab thought for a while. Somehow this Hindu Brahmin had stirred him to pity. He consulted the Naib Subedar and then ordered: "Let this Brahmin be given the absolute property right over the land in the Dhamouli Pargana of Bihar." Ram Ram trembled, not with fear, but with joy. A crescendo of joy coursed through his veins right upto the heart. He tried to utter a few words of thanks but his voice failed him. He faltered and fell at a short distance from the Royal throne. He didn't get up again. Death was instantaneous.

A property bequeathed by the perfidious Nawab, Mir Zafar, who in collusion with the British at Calcutta, toppled the last independent Nawab of Bengal at the battle of Plassey, was a tainted property and a curse on the entire family. Astrological predictions had indicated that the family members would be subject to violent deaths and the property itself would be a bone of contention among the different co-sharers. A generation of half-educated, indolent and spineless zemindars would squander the

family wealth to such an extent that they would be forced to become wage-earners, servants of the same British whom some of their ancestors had befriended. Events following the sudden death of Ram Ram had, to a remarkable extent, proved the accuracy of these astrological predictions.

Possession of the property bequeathed to Ram Ram by the Nawab and subsequently inherited by his son, Ramapati, presented formidable difficulties. A youngman of twentyfive when his father died, Ramapati had thoroughly adapted himself to the environment of the decadent *Suba* (Province) of Bangla (Bengal) and was so much enamoured of the land and its people that he lost no time to adopt the surname "Bandopadhyay" without attracting any opposition whatsoever. This metamorphosis from a Kanyakubja Brahmin of Kanouj to a *kulin* Brahmin of Bengal gave him the requisite social sanction to marry a Bengali girl from the suburban town of Uttarpara, on the other side of the Hooghli river. Goaded by his wife to claim the zemindari conferred on his late father by the Nawab, Ramapati set out for Patna by a boat with a dozen trusted attendants. Ganga in those days provided an easy and navigable waterway, there being no railway system until 1858 or so. Journey by boat in those days was extremely hazardous. River pirates moved surreptitiously and attacked unwary travellers who happened to venture out at nightfall. Ramapati and his party did not take undue risks. They camped on the bank of the Ganga at night and set sail as the cock crowed. Reaching the northern bank at a place called Paleza, Ramapati and his men proceeded on foot towards Mithansarai, a place near Muzaffarpur town. Approaching the revenue headquarters Ramapati produced before the local officials the Nawab's *firman* to stake his claim to the property but the local residents literally hounded him out and threatened to drown him and his attendants in the swirling waters of the Burhi Gandak. A dejected Ramapati had to retrace his steps but he did not give up hope. He collected a sizeable force of *pahalwans* (muscle-men) wielding *lathis* (bamboo sticks) and *bhalas* (spears) and reappeared on the scene after a month. What followed was nothing short of a skirmish between the local people and the retinue of Ramapati. A young village boy was speared to death in an orgy of violence as the hired *pahalwans* sought to stem the onslaught of the villagers armed with assorted implements of varying shapes and sizes. Soon panic gripped the villagers and they laid down their arms, a gesture which indicated their submission to the suzerainty of the new zemindar. But suddenly, as if from nowhere, appeared the distraught mother of the slain youth with hairs dishevelled, clothes disarrayed and a frame trembling with unimaginable indignation. She carried a knife in her right hand and swiftly stood between the two warring camps. "Fie, fie, you cowards," she addressed the village jawans, "you

let these ruffians kill my defenceless son. Why didn't you drown yourselves in the Burhi Gandak?" Saying this she darted towards Ramapati like an injured tigress and before any one could hold her, she thrust the knife in the bosom of the unwary Ramapati. "To hell with your zemindari," she shouted and darted towards the river and took a headlong plunge. She bobbed up over the water for a while and then sank down to the bottom.

A zemindari was thus consecrated in human blood.

After Ramapati's tragic death the zemindari devolved on his two minor sons—Ramtaran and Ramcharan. But the person who guided the affairs of the new zemindari was the widow of Ramapati, a woman of strong determination and courage. She appointed a competent manager to look after her interests in the far-flung areas of Dhamouli Pargana of Bihar. When he came of age, Ramtaran built a fabulous zamindar house in Baranagar close to the Ganga. The younger brother Ramcharan built a magnificent residential house off Kalyani bazar in Muzaffarpur town. Ramtaran never came down to Muzaffarpur and gave a free hand to his younger brother to look after and manage his property there.

Two generations thereafter followed.

The mansion at Baranagar was considerably enlarged to accommodate a large family—the descendants of Ramtaran and Ramcharan. The mansion had a very imposing facade. A Mughal-style *darwaja* (gate), with spikes fixed thereto, formed the entrance which was guarded by a liveried *darwan* (gate-man). Once inside the gate, the visitor would find a big rectangular courtyard with latticed verandahs on the ground and first floors. This was the *Nat-Mandir* (place for religious and other functions), where during the festive season Durga Puja was celebrated with much gaiety. The *zenana* (women-folk) watched the *jatra* (an ancient form of open air drama) while seated on *makhmal* (velvet) cushions in the covered verandah. The men-folk sat in exclusive enclosures reserved for them in a corner of the first floor. The rank and file squatted on jute mattresses in the courtyard itself. The living room or *Baithak-khanu* was out of bounds for the ladies of the household. This was the place where at night under the brightly lit chandeliers, suspended from painted ceilings, rested the zemindars reclining against stuffed silken pillows in the company of friends and sycophants while *nautch* (dancing) girls, popularly known as *baijis*, regaled the audience with their hit songs and dances. Glasses of liquor clinked and bells of damsels jingled to produce a romantic atmosphere with lights, curtains, chandeliers swaying and swinging with every gust of wind blowing from the Bay of Bengal.

The jigs and reels would go on and on till past midnight when at an appointed hour the zemindar's attendant would, at the behest of the Rani-ma (queen-mother), pull up the inebriated zemindar with all his might and conduct him to the inner apartments, where on a large mahogany bed, the unfortunate consort wept the night away.

My father, Umashankar was endowed with a spiritual bent of mind. Fed up with the artificial life of Calcutta, with its horse-drawn *Gharies* (carriages) and trams, its narrow stinking bazars, its rotten shops of flesh trade in the backyards of Sonagachi and Chitpur, its sickening sensationalism and the insidious exploitation of the weak and the under-fed, Umashankar took to *sanyas* (asceticism) and left his house and family to seek bliss in the caverns of the Himalayas.

It was injudicious on the part of my father to marry off all his three sons-Devidas (25), myself (23) and Nemaidas (21)-before we could find our moorings. No doubt he was discharging all his responsibilities but he didn't realise that the zemindari had shrunk in size due to extravagant life-style of our predecessors, and the income therefrom was most variable.

I was married to Suchitra Bala, daughter of an affluent Raja. My wife is only thirteen years old. Within a year of our marriage I was afflicted with pthisis. People talk of wedded bliss. But it has no meaning for me. I am nearing the end of my life. My only worry is about Suchitra. What will happen to her? She has known no love. Motherhood has been denied to her. Will she spend her grim solitary life within the forewalls of her parental house? Will she remain a widowed recluse trying to recapture the contours of her husband's affection? I would to God that Suchitra after my death, stays in her father-in-law's house, serving my ageing mother to the best of her abilities. I trust that my elder sister-in-law, Sarojini, for whom I have the highest regard, would give her the requisite succour after my death. A century is ending and a new century will soon begin. But I will not live to see that. The curse on Ramapati runs all along the line.—A.C. September 1, 1899.”

When Benu finished reading Anadi Charan's booklet a mist gathered before his eyes. A window to his past ancestry was, as it were, suddenly flung open. He put the booklet in the velvet casket. Thanks to Anadi Charan for this peep into the past. Contemporary history was known to him. He had learnt it from his elders. But the history of the zemindars of Baranagar was unknown to him. Benu could not resist a silent prayer for his departed mother, Sarojini, who had inducted Mejoma in their household and installed her in the high pedestal, which was her due.

III

BABUS OF MUZAFFARPUR

Satyacharan was the first cousin of Devidas. He had left Baranagar with his mother for Muzaffarpur, where the zeminder's house was located. Young Satyacharan was cast in a different mould. Not for him the luxurious life style of his ancestors. He wanted to serve the people and for this purpose he organised a social organisation with the help of his close associates in Muzaffarpur's Chata Bazar.

The Burhi Gandak was at some distance from Kalyani Bazar. The river, usually docile, would swell to great heights during the monsoon. Water would enter the town through creeks and drains and inundate large areas. The most pressing need was the construction of an embankment at Sikandarpur to check the inflow of water. But no governmental assistance was forthcoming. Satyacharan called his cousin Devidas to Muzaffarpur to assist him in his humanitarian work. The two brothers and other volunteers worked with a missionary zeal to collect materials for the construction of a bund to protect the town of Muzaffarpur. But before the scourge of flood did subside, a far more vicious peril was knocking at the door. This was the plague. Starting from Purani Bazar area the epidemic soon spread to other parts of the town. People fled in panic leaving their hearths and homes. The dead were left to rot and the diseased were left to fend for themselves. The two Banerjee brothers donned high boots and gloves and moved with a band of dedicated workers from house to house to render succour. But it was too onerous a task. Thousands perished before medical help arrived.

One night Satyacharan came home shivering. When the physician came, Satyacharan was in delirium with high fever and swollen joints. It did not take the doctor long to diagnose the ailment. There was no remedy and so no drug could cure Satyacharan. In the third day he was dead. The grateful citizens of Muzaffarpur attended his funeral in thousands and collected funds to raise a befitting memorial to the departed soul.

In the meantime other things were happening elsewhere. The Government of the day had incurred popular wrath by the Partition of Bengal. A wave of anger had swept Bengal. The British Sahebs became the targets of attacks by young revolutionaries who had taken the pledge to undo the wrong committed by the alien Government and to drive away the Britishers from the Indian soil. On April 30, 1908 before the European club of Muzaffarpur off the station road, a young lad called Khudiram hurled a bomb, while perched on a tree, on a passing phaeton. His missile did not kill Kingsford, the Chief Presidency Magistrate, for whom it was intended,

but it ripped off the vehicle killing Mrs. and Miss Kennedy, wife and daughter of Mr. Pringel Kennedy, a barrister and sympathiser of nationalists, who were using the phaeton that day. An intensive search for the assailants was mounted. A raiding party came to the zemindar's house and grabbed a buxom boy crouching beneath the stairs out of sheer fright. "*Hum Nahi, Hum Nahi, Woh*" uttered the fat-bellied urchin pointing towards another boy, near the staircase. The timely intervention of Devidas saved the boy from possible harassment at the hands of the police.

In the meantime Khudiram had walked from Muzaffarpur to Waini, a distance of 22 miles. Exhausted from continuous walking he fell asleep in a grocer's shop near Waini station. It didn't take the police long to nab him while he was fast asleep.

After the death of his cousin Satyacharan, Devidas continued to stay in the zemindar's house in Kalyani. He was the *de facto* guardian of the two infant sons of Satyacharan and the manager of the estate. When Satyacharan's widow, Sarojbala, expressed a desire to look after the affairs of her late husband's property, Devidas moved out of the zemindar's house, retaining only three rooms which belonged to him and his two brothers. He built a two-storeyed house of his own, and lived there with Nemaïdas. His younger brother Anadicharan had died long before and his widowed wife Suchitra lived with her brother in Kidderpore area of Calcutta.

Apparently Devidas's financial position was sound for he maintained like other zemindars, a stable, a coach, and two horses. Besides the syce (coachman), a liveried footman stood behind the coach while Devidas drove to Sikandarpur *maïdan* (ground) for a breath of fresh air. Devidas's wife was an extraordinarily beautiful lady and she was known for her piety and gentleness. For a zemindar money was not a problem so long as the land remained intact. But land was vanishing as the demands of the family consisting of four sons and five daughters, besides the parents, swelled beyond all proportions. Devidas loved to entertain friends and acquaintances and he made generous contributions to charitable institutions. He was fond of music and loved to play on the violin, an instrument gifted to him by his father. His younger brother, Nemaïdas was like the serpent in the garden of Eden. Without the knowledge of his elder brother he started squandering money. He sold off his shares in the landed property and came to such a pass that he had no money to marry off his daughter. Opium eaters are like lotus-eaters. "If death be the end of life why should life all labour be?" Better it was to gulp balls of opium and dream of "stately pleasure domes" like Xanadu's Kubla Khan, which the poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, himself an opium-eater, had deftly

immortalised. So Nemaïdas dozed and dozed and when the intoxication was off he planned grandiose schemes, which he thought he could execute. One such scheme was the setting up of a brick-kiln in Nepal for which he borrowed a sum of rupees one lakh from his brother, Devidas. But opium-eaters are seldom successful in their ventures. It so happened that while the kiln was duly opened, the income therefrom was negligible. Nemaïdas could not pay back the debts to the creditors who had given him materials on credit. Men cleverer than him bungled his enterprise to such an extent that Nemaïdas landed himself in jail for unrequited debts. An SOS was sent to his brother, who spent another thirty thousand rupees to bale him out of his difficulties. In the meantime *moujas* after *moujas* changed hands. Marriage of his two grown-up daughters cost Devidas more than fifty thousand rupees. Another thirty thousand was spent by Devidas on the marriage of niece, whose father, Nemaïdas, had become bankrupt. Matters did not rest there. Nemaïdas had one-third share in the house built by Devidas. Quietly without the knowledge of his brother, he sold off his share to a rank outsider. This was a highly treacherous act for which the succeeding generations—sons and grand-sons of Devidas—suffered untold miseries.

Bereft of any property of his own, except the house which he had built, Devidas was in difficult straits. With a large family to support and without any ostensible means of income, Devidas was hard put to pay off his debts. He sold off his stable, his coach, and dispensed with the services of his syce and footman. He rented out his house and moved with his family to Waini where he took up the job of a store-keeper in the Agricultural Institute there. Sarojini, Devidas's wife, bore the calamity with a quiet composure but when she entered the three-roomed quarter of her husband in the Naulakha campus, she broke down completely and wept bitterly much to the confusion of her minor children. Shibu, the eldest, wiped off his mother's tears and consoled her: "Why do you weep, Ma. One day we'll grow up and then your miseries will end. We'll engage a maid servant for you." That was 1915.

Early in 1917 Sarojini told her husband that she was expecting again. She said she could not stay any more in Waini and do all the household chores. She pleaded that she might be sent to zemindar's house in Saraiyagunj in Muzaffarpur where they still had two rooms of their own. Moreover, she could get the help of her relatives in her hour of need. Devidas was struck dumb. Another mouth to feed! What should he do? Shibu was due to appear at the Entrance examination. Three other sons were at school. Who would look after them? Cares and anxieties weighed heavily on Devidas's mind. He let things drift for a few months. One evening he returned from work with a high fever. For three days he

was in a delirium. Dr Michael, the hospital doctor, diagnosed the ailment as typhoid. Devidas overruled medical advice and desired to be shifted to Muzaffarpur. A strenuous road and train journey further aggravated his illness. He realised that his end was near. He called Shibu, placed his hand on his head and made an effort to say something but failed. Someone broke into the room with a telegram and shouted in the ears of the dying Devidas "Shibu has passed Entrance Examination in first division." Whether Devidas was able to hear the electrifying news was anybody's guess. At the age of forty-four the life of a gifted zemindar ebbed away.

A spectre of utter destitution threatened Devidas's family. When things looked bleak, a kind-hearted British Director, who was aware of Devidas's family background and appreciated his integrity and sincerity, offered the job of a clerk to Shibdas on a monthly salary of Rs. 30/-.

One day in November 1917 a son was born to Sarojini at Muzaffarpur. The posthumous child was derisively called *rakhshasa* (demon), being the slayer of his father. But the eldest brother of the child named the new-born as Benu.

IV

NAULAKHA AND BENU'S HOUSEHOLD

No tract was more neglected during the decades preceding the commencement of the present century than North Bihar. Champaran District of North Bihar, some eighty kilometres from Muzaffarpur, was since mid-nineteenth century suffering untold miseries at the hands of the British indigo planters.

Alongside the exploitation of the ryots by the British planters was the apathy shown by the then alien Government to the distress of the people of North Bihar. The whole area was pestilence-ridden. Epidemics like plague and cholera took a huge toll of lives. During the monsoon the rivers were invariably in spate and flooded extensive areas of fertile paddy lands, which were the source of subsistence of the people. The result was famine, which forced the peasantry to leave their hearths and homes and move to more prosperous areas in search of food. Thousands perished in their fight against hunger. While South Bihar was linked by a broadgauge railway line with Calcutta in the East and Delhi in the west, North Bihar had to rest content with a meter gauge railway, which was operated by a private foreign company—The Bengal and North Western Railway (B.N.W.R.). Crossing the Ganga at Paleza Ghat or Semaria Ghat by ferries provided by Steamer Companies was both arduous and time-taking. During floods, the ghats had to be shifted several miles away from the normal crossing points. The trains were slow, tardy and overcrowded. The nationalist press championed the grievances of the North Bihar residents and pressed the Government of the day to rid the area of chronic famine conditions. Need for a comprehensive scheme of agricultural development with emphasis on improved techniques of cultivation was urged both in the press and the Governor-General's Council. Good sense dawned at last and the then Governor-General and Viceroy, Lord Curzon of Kedleston, laid the foundation in 1905 in the village of Waini (re-named Pusa Road) of the edifice known as the Imperial Agricultural Research Institute. The laboratory of the Institute was built out of the generous grant of an American philanthropist, Mr. Phipps, and when completed it was the first of its kind in Asia. The local people, however, called the Institute "Naulakha" (so named because a sum of rupees nine lakhs was said to have been spent on its construction). They stared at the tall and gaunt structure of stone and marble with its high black shining domes over-looking the Burhi Gandak, and the huge glass windows that shimmered as the first light of the sun broke through the dense foliage of the Bairia Dhaf, scarcely a mile away, providing a superb back-drop to the man-made marvel that the Institute was. In course of time "Naulakha"

became synonymous with the entire Institute campus, which extended upto the peripheral villages of Mahmuda, Dighra, Bhuskaul, not to mention Waini itself on whose heartland the Institute was located. Naulakha was Waini and Waini was Naulakha and that was how the common people understood the relationship.

Legend has it that when the foundation of the Institute was laid ominous signs had been observed by the local villagers. Inexplicable cries, as if emanating from the hunted animals, had been heard from the direction of the Bairia Dhaf. Elder people sitting on the village *chaupal* (meeting place) discussed these portents of evil and shrugged their heads: "This Naulakha won't last. Someday it would crack." 1905 was also the year in which the Partition of Bengal, an event of extraordinary significance, took place. It lighted up, as it were, a fuse which shook the foundations of the British Raj in India.

Sometimes names are given to objects or places without any thought. Burhi Gandak, as the name signifies, conveys the picture of a shrunk stream like a shrivelled old lady with dangling skins and shrunk eyes. But Burhi Gandak belies this literal description. It is perennially young. It has existed from the times the Himalayas arose after, as the scientists say, a great upheaval in the earth's crust in the unrecorded past. The Burhi Gandak has its moods and temperament. At times it frets and fumes like a damsel dishonoured. At other times it quivers in wrath, swelling to enormous heights to wreak vengeance on the puny creatures of the earth who dared to defile and confine her in narrow restricted channels. It overflows its boundaries and in one broad sweep destroys all that comes in its way, devastating huge areas of farmland and uprooting the giant trees that girdle the Bairia Dhaf.

By 1915 the prestigious Naulakha situated near Burhi Gandak had been completely built up with its high domes overlooking expansive lawns and colonnade of *shisam* trees lining both sides of the road in the northern bank of Burhi Gandak. Bougainvillea shrubs with their crimson flowers added a touch of colour to the prevailing greenery. Right through the township ran a road, paved with pebbles, from the fringe of the Bairia Dhaf in the east to Waini bazar in the west and thence onwards to Muzaffarpur town. Close to the acres of bamboos, the haunt of wild boars and foraging jackals, was laid out a polo ground where the sahebs (English men) had their week-end polo matches while the memsahebs (English ladies) watched, fanned all the time by a canvas *punkha* (fan) hung on a horizontal bar and pulled with the aid of a pulley by the native *punkha* boy. The Babus of Naulakha sat at a respectable distance and enjoyed as each *chukker* was completed. But there were a few urchins

who climbed up the branches of the age-old banyan tree and witnessed the goings-on with wondrous eyes.

Facing the polo ground was the Institute's hospital with separate beds for Indians and Europeans. An Indian doctor sat under a *punkha* suspended from the ceiling in a fair-sized room, and examined out-door patients, both males and females, the duration of the examination depending on the age and sex of the patient. As he wrote his prescriptions, the doctor carefully glanced over the anatomical features of his patients and contorted his eye-balls, whether out of glee or hatred nobody could say. But the Babus said that Dr. Das, the Assistant Surgeon, had a more than ordinary interest in young female patients. The British surgeon, Dr Michael, was, however, a doctor *par excellence*. People loved him for his professional ability, his pleasant and affable manners and the confidence that he exuded when dealing with patients. "We would like to be treated by the saheb and not by the *Bangali* (Bengali) doctor, Das Babu," the ailing *chaprasis* (messengers) in the Naulakha would plead with the hospital clerk.

Alongside the polo ground a road moved eastwards towards the cemetery. The shoots of bamboos almost hung over the compound walls of the grave-yard and sheltered it from unwanted intruders. The place was abnormally quiet save the whisper of the wind as it blew through the willows and the overhanging branches of the bamboos that grew in the adjoining jungle known as *Bans Jhaar*. Felling of bamboo trees was prohibited under orders of the Institute's Director but there were occasions when one could fell a tree with permission. One such occasion was the death of a person. The Hindus carried the corpses to the cremation ground, known as Gorai Ghat, on a sort of stretcher made from strips of green bamboos tied together.

Leaving the cemetery on the right the road moved further towards the east until it reached a rectangular-shaped structure built of bricks and mortar. The building had a coating of red and it had two gates—one opening to the south and the other to the north in the direction of the Bairia Dhaf. This was the hostel for research students, the warden's quarter being located just near the northern gate. Beyond the hostel, the road meandered to the cremation ground on the bank of the Burhi Gandak, and almost on the fringe of the Bairia Dhaf. Not far from the hostel were the quarters of Babus—long rows of three-roomed houses with vacant spaces in front and back and an inner courtyard enclosed with a boundary wall. Not all the quarters were of the same size or design. There were two-roomed quarters also with tiled verandahs meant for Babus of lower income groups. Right from the hostel a *kankar* (pebble)—strewn road

lined with tall and sturdy *shisam* trees went straight westwards past the Naulakha, past the experimental farm and past the locality known as Penjghar. It thereafter proceeded to Waini Bazar touching the Waini Post Office, the Government High School and the market-place known as *Pethia*.

The Central office was the place where the Babus worked. There were clerks, typists, stenographers, store-keepers, cashiers, record sorters and other paraphernalia of official cadres copied almost in entirety from the Central Secretariat in Delhi. The Institute proper was manned by scientific staff, the Heads of Divisions being British Officers. The junior scientific posts were held by Indians possessing adequate qualifications and experience in the requisite disciplines. Electricity came to the Institute much later. Initially only the offices were electrified. Then the bungalows of the British sahebs facing the Burhi Gandak were provided with electricity. But the quarters of the Babus did not have power at all. They had to manage with kerosene lamps, the 'hurricane' brand being the most popular.

A power house functioned in the vicinity of the Central office, which was the office of the Director of the Institute. A police post was housed in close proximity to the Central office. A bell in the office compound was struck hourly to denote the time. When the bell was rung four times, the housewives hurried from their usual mid-day gossips to the kitchen to prepare the repast for their husbands returning from work after a busy day's work.

Such was Waini in 1918 when Shibdas took up the job of a clerk in the Central office.

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A realisation dawned on Benu quite early in his life that he was bereft of a father and a mother. How his mother was he did not know. But Bhute's mother used to say that she was very beautiful. But that was no consolation for Benu. How he yearned to be loved and caressed and protected by his mother and brothers and sisters. Well, it was not Benu's fault if he dozed while learning the lessons in the *First Book*. His poor constitution did not allow him to keep awake for long duration. As soon as his head bowed down over the book, a thud came from his second brother's fist on his back. Benu would cry and sit up again to read. Moments later he dozed again. This time the punishment was more severe. Bodily he would be lifted and taken to the verandah where the pitch-dark night appeared to Benu's boyish mind as the very embodiment of the devil ready to engulf him in his giant arms. Seeing Benu's

predicament sister Shobha would vanish from the scene. A hell of a cry would pierce the stillness of the night. Benu's Dada would then appear on the scene and rescue him from the clutches of his irate teacher.

To Benu aunt Mejoma was as hard as a flint and as soft as a feather. He had seen her in the best of moods and in the worst of moods. As the presiding lady of the household she had powers unlimited. She could pull up the defiant and reward the submissive. She could pour a thousand invectives and in moments later resort to blandishments to appease and ingratiate. When Mejoma in her fits of anger showered her blows on Benu, he would shriek in such a loud pitch that his Dada would intervene and scold Mejoma much to Benu's satisfaction. "Why do you always beat Benu?" his brother would say to Majoma. "Don't you see how sickly he is? Poor child! He will die soon, being deprived of his mother's love." Benu's sobs would rise to a crescendo. Then Mejoma would pull Benu to her lap, imprint affectionate kisses on his cheeks and say: "Don't cry Benu, I'll give you *golap-chchari* (sugar candy)."

While Mejoma hated him, she loved him also. In his childhood Benu could not comprehend this love-hate relationship. At the age of five when he underwent a major operation, Benu lay on the bed critically ill. The British surgeon, Dr. Pibbles, of the Government hospital, Muzaffarpur had performed an extra-ordinary operation on his infected mastoid? For days Benu's life hanged on the balance. His Mejoma kept a twenty-four hour vigil, and put slabs of ice on Benu's head, while the attending doctors fought a grim battle with death. In the end doctor's skill and Mejoma's nursing—or was it fate?—prevailed and Benu was back to his senses. It took several months of nursing before Benu could be restored to health.

Life at Muzaffarpur in those days was a refreshing contrast to Waini's placid existence. There was hardly any traffic at Waini. Not a carriage moved on the road; occasionally a *tum-tum* (a cart on two wheels drawn by a horse) would appear on the road; or the ubiquitous bullock-cart roll on the *kutchra* (unpaved) cart-way with a humdrum monotonous noise. But here at Muzaffarpur the buggies, *tum-tums* and phaetons moved with unbelievable swiftness. And the houses? They were so high and tall. Benu's own room on the first floor in that zemindar's house overlooked a narrow lane. The house on the other side of the lane, close to Benu's room, was so high that the could scarcely see the sun. Close by was the *mandi* (market) for wholesale grains whence a poop-poop sound could be heard throughout the day. His Chchorda said that was the noise emitted by the oil engine while cutting stalks of grain or grass for making cattle-feed. One day Benu went with his Chchorda to see the mysterious engine

which made the poop-poop sound, and the Garib Nath temple in Chata Bazar. It was a much revered place where devotees came with votive gifts to offer to Lord Shiva. It was said that the deity in the temple had Himself arisen from the earth.

Back to Waini after recuperation, Benu was taken to the Primary School, much against his wish. The very name of school somehow struck terror in his heart. But when Dwarka, the domestic aid who hailed from Mahmuda village, carried Benu on his shoulders to school, there was little that he could do except shower kicks on the dark, swarthy, bare body of his carrier with his feeble legs. Undaunted Dwarka landed Benu before the bespectacled, white-haired skinny old gentleman who sat on a rickety chair with a ruler in hand—a sort of presiding deity over a group of boys and girls of different age-groups, who squatted on a mattress with slates in hand and made all sorts of noises—some articulate and some inarticulate.

The Headmaster was Awadh Behari Lal, who enrolled Benu as his fifty-first pupil and commanded him to take a seat beside a girl named Sujata. Strangely enough Benu did not cry or try to run away from the class. A boy of Benu's age whispered from behind: "I'm Bhute. I'll be your friend." And there were many others, Desho, Raman and Toshu, to name a few, who were delighted to have a new class friend. The thatched primary school, with palmyra mattings on the floor, suddenly became for Benu a sanctuary where he could flee when life at home became too oppressive. By and by Benu became very friendly with Sujata, who was younger to him by a year or two.

But soon Benu became fidgety and refused to go to school. "What's the matter?" his Mejoma asked. "I won't go to school unless you give me a log of wood." "Log of wood? what for?" Mejoma was surprised. She couldn't make out what Benu wanted to convey. "The teacher has asked me to bring a log of wood for cooking purposes." "Oh, that's why you're scared to go to school. Damn that teacher of yours. Sometimes he wants cooking oil, sometimes firewood. He doesn't know how difficult it is to manage the household with the meagre income of your brother." But Benu wouldn't budge and remained seated with the head bent on his chest. Mejoma had to give in. Dwarka, the domestic aid, had to take a big log of wood on his shoulder and take Benu along with him to the school.

Outside their quarter were two trees—one on each side of the pathway—which produced white flowers with streaks of yellow. The saplings of the trees, Benu was told, were planted by his father. The trees were

now sturdy and leafy. Benu loved to climb on the trunk and pluck the scented flowers which were as soft as velvet. They called them *tagar*. Some called them *gulancha*. A *jaba* (*hibiscus*) and a lemon tree, also planted by his father, were now in full bloom.

Shibdas, Benu's eldest brother whom he called Dada, was a handsome youngman, fond of friends and stage-acting. Nothing delighted him more than to stage a drama on a make-shift platform and play a stellar role. Endowed with histrionic abilities of a very high order Shibdas had organised a dramatic club whose members were young enthusiasts from the Naulakha. Its activities usually commenced in November each year when, after the selection of a play for staging, the Babus held rehearsals in Biren Babu's mess-cum-residence close to the Recreation Club. The rehearsals would go on for hours and in between several cups of tea were consumed. The appointed day for staging the drama was the Saraswati Puja or Basant Panchami day, usually in January or early February. A week before the staging of the drama feverish activities could be witnessed. Bamboos freshly cut from *Bans Jhaar* were tied with ropes to make the frame-work of a stage.

Then wooden planks of appropriate sizes were placed on the platform and nailed. The stage was fitted with wings, scenes and a heavy curtain called 'drop' scene of green velvet satin. By the use of pulleys fixed on both sides of the curtains, the scenes could be changed, a manoeuvre which required practice of several days. There were persons to look after lighting, the auditorium and the green room. The auditorium was usually an open space enclosed by a thick canvas, called *kanat*, with a canvas roofing—called *shamiyana*—to ward off the bitter cold. Nothing was overlooked. The sets were kept ready to be moved with rapidity. The prompter hid himself behind the wings and the concert party were ready in the background with assorted musical instruments. Those were the days when female roles were acted by males in feminine garb, complete with wigs, bangles and ear-tops. For days the urchins of Naulakha—Benu among them—would crowd around the stage and watch the goings-on with an air of expectancy. Needless to say Benu was highly elated because all his three brothers had parts to play in the drama to be staged.

When the appointed day came, the community were given a delicious feast after the *Puja* was over, and cries of "Saraswati Mai Ki Jai" rent the air. Then at nightfall, the old and the young, the gents and ladies from every household, congregated under the spacious *shamiyana*, where a separate enclosure with bamboo-*chic* (nets) was reserved for the women folk. The children squatted on the mats in front of the stage. On cushioned chairs on a side row sat the Director and his wife, besides other

dignitaries. Usually the Director sat for an hour or so, and announced the award of medals to those actors who impressed him most.

On a cold wintry night of January when Benu shivered and sought the warmth of his Mejoma, while nestling beside her, and dozed in the midst of bizarre goings-on on the stage, he was jerked by a slight push. "Look, Benu. There's your Dada on the stage," said Mejoma pointing to a grisly old but handsome figure with a white flowing beard.

"Where?"

"There. That old man. He's acting Shah Jahan."

Benu could hardly believe that the old man was his Dada, who was always a young, smiling, handsome person.

"No. He's not my Dada." Benu shrugged his head. But then the voice appeared to be familiar. It was the same intonation, but a little affected. The same gait, the same movement of legs. The old man's eyes betrayed him. He was his Dada no doubt. Moments later there was loud clapping. The Director had been pleased to announce the award of a silver medal to Shibdas Banerjee for his superb acting.

To his friends Shibdas was man of the *majlis* (assembly), an actor *par excellence*. He could move the audience to tears or laughter as the occasion demanded. He had the art to conceal his emotions—a fact known only to his most intimate friends—and the consummate skill to smile even when the heart ached. The manner in which he accepted fortune's buffets and rewards with equanimity surprised even his closest friends. Once he had confided to his friend Biru Babu, the P.A. to the Director, that play-acting was for him a means to laugh away the ills of life.

V CONTOURS OF MAHMUDA

The Bairia Dhaf in those days was a dark and dismal jungle tract where tall and shrubby trees embraced each other to form an ideal setting for the beasts of prey to prowl about. Besides the *Ber* (or *bair* as known locally) and the *Palasa* (Flame of the Forest), sleek and knotty frames of bamboos vied with the *Neem* and the *Babul* (acacia) to give the Dhaf an identity of its own. The bushes and the wild reeds which carpeted the area gave a sanctuary to the more ferocious animals whose nightly growls broke the stillness of the Dhaf and struck terror in the minds of tiny toddlers nestling in the bosom of their mothers in huts about a mile away. "That's the *bagh* (tiger)," the grandma would whisper to the child who would not sleep, "Be quiet; it's coming." Then a howl of hundred jackals and a cacophony of myraid birds would resound through the vastness of the Bairia Dhaf.

About a mile from the fringe of the forest was the village of Mahumda encircled by a cluster of palms and dates. The palm trees produced sweet juices which a section of the villagers tapped for the purpose of preparing a brew called *tari*. The fruit and the leaves and the trunk of the palm trees were utilised by the villagers in various ways. While the trunk was used as beams for building purposes the leaves were converted into hand fans (*punkha*), mattresses and coverings for roof tops. The fruit was used for preparing sweets and candies. The village had grown up haphazardly. A cluster of huts here and a cluster of huts there faced both sides of a narrow serpentine road, which got clogged during rains making it impassable. Mud-walls and thatched roofs kept the huts cool when the hot westerly winds called *pachchia* blew relentlessly over the Mahmuda village, forcing the inhabitants to take shelter under the ramshackle huts or rest under the cool shade of leafy mango trees. At a little distance from the dwelling units could be seen, during favourable seasons, the rolling acres of paddy fields, lush green, extending upto the Burhi Gandak embankment. At places could be seen acres of swaying mustard plants with a crown of golden flowers brilliantly lit by the vernal sun.

The dwellers on the land were mostly peasants who either served as farm-hands in the Naulakha or tilled the land belonging to the zemindars.

Zemindars in those days formed a class by themselves. They lived well, dressed well, ate well and regaled themselves with the choicest drinks. When they went beyond their palm-fringed double-storeyed mansions riding on horse-drawn phaetons, they exuded exotic scents and aromas. The local people crouched and bowed on road-sides and made

way for the zemindar's coach to pass through. The zemindars were their *Ma Baap* (Parents) and they had to be worshipped.

Ramanand Mishra was a zemindar with a difference. He was an exception to the general description of that privileged class. A complete teetotaler, he was essentially a people's man. He never for a moment forgot that power and pelf were meant to be utilised for the public good. Familiarity with the villagers and a deep involvement with their problems were the special traits of his mental make-up. Passing his Entrance Examination from the Calcutta University, Ramanand Mishra had joined the Presidency college for his graduation. But before he could complete his studies came the call for Civil Disobedience. "Boycott schools and colleges" was the slogan that resounded in the streets of Calcutta and other cities of the land. Ramanand left his college and went back to his village. He devoted himself to combating the evils that pervaded the society—untouchability, ignorance and illiteracy—and relieving the distress of the underprivileged sections of the society. Never did he hesitate to walk down the lanes of Chipiatoli tenanted by the low castes, the Harijans as they were then known. He commuted between Mahmuda and Patna to draw the attention of the authorities to the distress, almost chronic distress, prevalent in his part of the land due to periodic flooding by the Burhi Gandak. But the wheels of the Government moved slowly. The months of July and August were the most critical and the aftermath of the floods brought diseases like cholera and typhoid, which took a heavy toll of lives. Governmental aid was niggardly. In those difficult circumstances Ramanand invariably got in touch with Mission Headquarters and they never failed him. In his days of depression his one consolation was the love and affection of his wife Sumitra and his attachment to his daughter, Sujata. His source of strength, bliss and comfort was the *Ramcharit Manas*, which Sumitra used to read to him in her sweet melodious voice.

Ramanand Mishra's house was fairly large but without any ostentation. Ramanand detested the system of *begar* (forced labour) and never employed his own farm labourers for doing any *begari* at his house. There were only two regular hands—Ramu and Ramjiwan. While Ramu tended the bullocks and drove the cart to the market to sell the farm produce, Ramjiwan looked after the Mahmuda house, attended to the kitchen garden, filled the water reservoir with buckets of water drawn from the well, and exercised general supervision over the work of the labourers hired for threshing and winnowing paddy. Ramjiwan looked young despite his sixty years. He had, in fact, served under Ramanand's father, Parmanand, and now he lifted baby Sujata on his shoulders as he used to lift Ramanand when he was a toddler. Three generations. Ramanand was proud of his intimate association with the Mishra family.

VI

PERIPHERAL VILLAGES : DIGHRA AND BHUSKAUL

Thikedar Ramnarayan was a 'petty' landlord of Bhuskaul. Finding the returns from land wholly unprofitable, he had sold away his land and taken up *Thikadari* (contract business) as a profession. He secured a contract from Naulakha for the extraction of timber from Bairia Dhaf. After his death, the family business was looked after by his son, Ramautar. Ramautar not only consolidated his father's business but further expanded it. He entered into a contract with the Naulakha authorities for supply of labour required for farm operations, building construction, maintenance of embankments, roads and premises. In Waini bazar he built a house of his own and spent three days in a week there. Adjacent to his residence was his coal depot and a yard for the storage of building materials like lime, and *bajri* (pebbles), wooden beams and bricks. These materials he obtained from wholesale merchants in Samastipur and Muzaffarpur. Ramautar's business was flourishing. For quicker movement he purchased a horse-drawn *tum-tum* (a carriage flat on top) and riding on it visited the neighbouring villages to post himself with the goings-on in the *pethia* (market) and the village *chaupals* (meeting place of villagers). He had learnt from his father that social contact was a *sine qua non* for any successful venture.

Tall and erect with a sun-tanned face; thick black hairs parted at the middle, sparkling eyes and tapering whiskers, Ramautar was the perfect specimen of a successful and satisfied businessman. Nothing mattered to him most than the profitability of his enterprises. Everything to him was "fair" in so far as business was concerned. He cared an *adhela* (half a pice) for what the people talked about him or his dealings.

Out on his morning *tum-tum* ride one day Thikedar Ramautar had an unexpected meeting with Chaudhury Chchoteylal (popularly known as Chaudhuriji), a person whom he detested with all his heart. Ramautar knew that Chaudhuri was a cut-throat money-lender, who had amassed a fortune at the expense of the poor villagers, to whom he loaned money at exorbitant rates of interest. To conceal his wealth Chchoteylal lived like an ordinary village-folk clad in a *dhoti* (wearing apparel) and *baniyan* (vest) and lived in an unostentatious house in Mahmuda. Ramautar hated him not because he carried on a clandestine business but because the Chaudhuri had the gumption to refuse a loan to his father in his dire need. "I'm a poor man; wherefrom shall I get such an amount," Chaudhuri had apologetically mentioned to Ramnarayan, when the latter had sought a loan of five thousand rupees to pay off debts accrued as a result of three successive crop failures.

"Ram Ram, Thikedar Saab (Saheb)." Chaudhuri Chchoteylal bent low with folded hands as he saw Ramautar's *tum-tum* quite close to him. "Ram Ram," Ramautar responded halting his *tum-tum* for a while. "How much wealth have you accumulated, Chaudhuri? Be careful Gorment (government) will raid your house one of these days. And if they don't, the Swaraji dacoits will burn you along with your house."

"Huzoor, I'm a poor man. You're my protector. May God bless you. The Thikedar did not tarry. He had other places to cover."

Bhuskaul village was contiguous to Mahmuda. A small kutch road, wide enough to allow a bullock-cart to negotiate through the slush and mud, led to a cluster of *neem* and *jamun* trees. There, hidden by the natural growth of the vegetative kingdom, could be seen rows of dilapidated huts, where in open courtyards, village urchins had their field day. These were the huts of low-castes, the predominant residents being *julhas* (fishermen) and *pasis* (tappers). A strong scent of dried fish pervaded the atmosphere. The locality which they inhabited was known as Chipiatoli. Ramautar's *tum-tum* had hardly passed the hamlets when Lotan Majhi caught the eyes of the Thikedar.

"Bandegi Janab," Lotan bent low in salutation.

"Bandegi," Ramautar responded while pulling up the horse.

Then looking at Lotan he asked:

"Where is Kamroo Sheikh?"

"He's gone to Samastipur, Huzoor."

"When will he be back?"

"That I can't say."

"And Sundar Pasi?"

"He should be in his shop." By shop Lotan meant the un-authorised toddy shop operated by Sundar Pasi.

Ramautar dismounted from his carriage and said in a stern voice:

"Look Lotan. Gorment (Government) is watching you fellows. You cut down the trees in Bairia Dhaf and collect the logs for firewood. First you pilfer and then you destroy the natural wealth. Don't you know what harm you're causing not to the *sarkar* (government) but to yourselves? Should there be a flood and erosion of the banks by the Burhi Gandak how're you going to contain the floods? If there's no wood, what're you going to throw in the river to protect the bund from the surging water? And look! A tree-less tract will soon turn into a desert. What'll happen to your fields?"

Lotan nodded as if to indicate that he understood all that the Thikedar Saheb said. "Huzoor, we're poor men; we'll do as you tell us," Lotan

said bowing reverentially before the learned Thikedar. "That you will," said Ramautar mounting his *tum-tum*. "Tell Sundar Pasi, he'll soon come to grief for unauthorised tapping of the palm trees." Smack went the whip and the Thikedar was gone in the direction of the Rawatpara, a more prosperous part of the village inhabited by well-to-do Kayasthas, Rajputs and Yadavas.

The most well-known figure in the village was Babu Viswanath Prasad, a retired *Mukhtiyar* and a widower. He had his ancestral house in Bhuskaul. A respectable man of sixty-five, with a shock of white hairs, a lean but bright face, Babu Viswanath Prasad would easily pass off as a college Don. Father of two—a son, Kampta, and a daughter, Shakuntala—Viswanath Babu was outwardly a well-contented person to whom fortune's favours were amply bestowed. His son, Kampta, a youngman in his late twenties, had a flourishing business in Muzaffarpur. His daughter, Shakuntala, a young girl of twenty one, was as intelligent as she was beautiful. Babu Viswanath Prasad's only regret was that his wife did not live long enough to see the children grow up. Ten years ago while being ferried across the Burhi Gandak on a day in July the boat in which she travelled with her husband capsized. While Babu Viswanath Prasad could be rescued, his wife, Sharda, had slipped in deep waters. She was dead by the time she could be hauled up.

In a decade when women's education had not the requisite fillip, Shakuntala had, despite criticisms from members of an orthodox family, joined the Patna Women's college and graduated with Honours. Now she was at home looking after her aged father.

Contact with a variety of people of different walks of life in different circumstances had enabled Babu Viswanath Prasad to become an astute judge of men and matters. He could tell from a mere look at the face whether the person was honest or dishonest. He saw not only the man's face but the innermost recesses of his mind. It was this gift of observation and introspection which prompted Viswanath Prasad to confide to his daughter, Shakuntala, that Ramautar, the Thikedar of Mahmuda, was a crook in a gentleman's guise, that Babu Ramanand Mishra was the gem of a zemindar with a heart as pure as the Ganga waters, and that Ramdas, the administrator of the Kali Mata temple in Bhuskaul, was a dangerous introvert, and a wolf in a lamb's garb. But the one limitation—and Babu Prasad was aware of it—to his probing powers was his failure to fathom the depths of his daughter's mind. This disability perhaps was common to all, even the astrologers, because the vision was invariably clouded by an overpowering filial love. Once a week Kampta Prasad came down to Bhuskaul with a sheaf of newspapers published from Patna and Calcutta,

and Babu Viswanath Prasad browsed through them daily after his breakfast. He was remarkably well-informed about the political developments within the country. He was sad to note the atmosphere of violence juxtaposed with the non-violent struggle of Mahatma Gandhi. Violence, Viswanath Prasad felt, would beget more violence and this chain reaction would be detrimental to the efforts made by the national leaders to win freedom. While he admired the courage, the determination, the spirit of sacrifice of the younger generation, he could not believe that the path they trod upon was the correct path. But he did believe—and that was a positive line of thinking—that the masses had to be awakened and made aware of the *zulum* (torture) of the rulers and the latter in turn must be made aware of the fact that the nation's ire, once aroused, would wreak vengeance on the perpetrators of injustice, cruelty and barbarity. Had not Bhagwan Sri Krishna told his friend and disciple, Arjun, that He would appear in *Yuga* after *Yuga* to chastise the oppressor and to re-establish the rule of *dharma*.

Babu Viswanath Prasad was browsing through the newspapers in the verandah of his house when Thikedar Ramautar's *tum-tum* stopped in front of the garden gate. Viswanath Babu looked towards the approaching figure of the Thikedar and said to himself "Here's the vermin at the door."

"Ram Ram Chachaji (uncle)." Ramautar usually addressed his elders as *chachaji* because a respectful mode of address was likely to beget a favourable response from the person addressed to.

"Ram Ram," said Viswanath Prasad rubbing his spectacles.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing in particular. I was passing this way. Thought I might look you up and pay my respects."

"That's very nice of you. But surely there must be something which you'll like to communicate. Come, what's that?"

Attracted by the Thikedar's voice Shakuntala appeared on the scene and stood by her father's chair. She had taken her bath, and looked resplendent in her Bhagalpuri white silk sari with a matching blouse and a vermilion mark on her forehead. She looked at the Thikedar who quickly surveyed her anatomy and then began:

"There's a talk in Naulakha that some dangerous youngmen are hiding in the Bairia Dhaf. They're out to create mischief. Terrorists. You know what they're, bombs, revolvers and what not. They try to kill innocent sahebs."

Shakuntala's face flushed red. There was a tint of red in her cheeks also. She knew the tribe of contractors rather well. "*Sarkar ka chamcha*" (sycophants of the government). That was what men like Ramautar were.

"Why don't the Government flush them out from the forest?" she asked. "You, Thikedar Saheb, have the contract for exploiting the Dhaf. You should be better informed." Shakuntala added with a sneer which the Thikedar didn't fail to observe.

The Thikedar looked at Shakuntala. She was of sterner stuff unlike Dudhia of Mahmuda whom he could beguile without much effort. He checked his feelings and said:

"No, no. Don't misunderstand me. All that I wanted to say was that we should beware of the *swadeshi* (nationalist) dacoits."

"*Swadeshi* dacoits?" Shakuntala was going to say something unpalatable to Ramautar when Babu Viswanath Prasad turned the course of conversation.

"Have you heard, Ramautar, Gandhiji is going to meet *Lat Saheb* (Viceroy) very soon. I hope something would emerge."

"I'm told," the Thikedar said, "the *Lat Saheb* is coming to Waini soon. The Suprinten (Superintendent) Babu has asked all the *thikedars* (contractors) to spruce up the township, repave the streets with *kankar* (pebbles) and trim the bougainvilleas in the College Ground. Our hands are full."

Talks did not proceed further. Ramautar took leave, mounted his *tum-tum* and proceeded towards Dighra. He must visit the Kalimata Temple where the administrator, Ramdas, had his *dera* (house).

Hemmed in between Imlipatti and Dighra was the *ashram* of Baba Baman Das. Nobody could give an authentic history of the Baba's abode. Although the Baba was not alive, the legend had it that much before the founding of the Naulakha, there dwelt in the midst of the Bairia Dhaf a *sadhu* (recluse) who had built for himself a temple to goddess Kali, the goddess of power and energy. Unmindful of the rigours of jungle life and undaunted by the prowling animals, the *sadhu*—Bamandas—used to saunter along the Burhi Gandak like a mighty colossus with a strident in one hand and a *kamandal* (brass water jug) in another. Rarely he came out of the Dhaf, but when he chose to come out and give *darshan* (audience) to the villagers in Waini, Bhuskaul, Mahmuda and Dighra, he was accorded a reverential welcome. Men, women and children flocked to have Baba's *darshan* so that they could receive Baba's blessings to ward

have Baba's *darshan* so that they could receive Baba's blessings to ward off the evil spirits and make their lives more secure and peaceful. Much as they desired that the Baba should stay in their midst and have a temple of his own, the Baba spurned their offer and betook himself to his forest abode. Then came the largescale deforesting and levelling for the establishment of the Naulakha township in Waini. That was a signal to the Baba that the time had come for him to depart. He took a handful of ashes, so the story goes, and threw them in the direction of Waini which the west wind scattered in all directions. Perhaps that was a curse for the Naulakha that was yet to be built. Whatever might be the significance of his gesture, the villagers soon discovered that the idol of goddess Kali had been removed from the temple and all that was left were a few pieces of earthen pots, which were used by the Baba for his meditation. The loss to Waini was a gain to Dighra, for, on the outskirts of the latter Baba Bamandas set up a hut wherein he installed the deity. Word had spread about the Baba's migration and the then zemindar of Dighra offered to the Baba a piece of land and money to set up a temple to goddess Kali. After a formal installation of the goddess the Baba went into a deep *samadhi* from which he never awoke. His mortal remains were buried within the temple compound and a raised platform bore a mute testimony to the fervour and devotion of Baba Bamandas.

The zemindar of Dighra, Natwarlal, brought a priest from Kashi and gave him land adjacent to the temple. The administration of the temple was put in charge of a local resident who called himself the disciple of Baba Bamandas and styled himself as Ramdas. Ramdas, however, was the unworthy disciple of an illustrious Guru and he found better occupations elsewhere. Close to the temple was the ashram-cum-*akhara* where the youngmen of Implipatti-better known as Paltanias-congregated every evening and regaled themselves with *bhāṅg* (an intoxicating concoction) and the more inebriating drink-the *tari*. Finding that he was missing something, Ramdas proceeded one day to Benaras, and after a fortnight's stay there returned with a handsome girl in her early teens and appointed her as the temple *sevika* (maid-servant). For Ratna it was a transportation to a strange land amid strange people. Daughter of a middle-aged widow, she was in deep distress when her elder brother, a talented youngman, suddenly vanished from the house and left for an undisclosed destination. The mother and the daughter sought refuge in an ashram (temple precinct) where Ramdas chanced to meet the two destitutes. Assuring the mother that he would take good care of her daughter and make her the *sevika* of the temple in Dighra, he brought Ratna leaving the mother to take care of herself.

Ratna's life in the temple was initially less difficult. She swept the

temple premises, cleaned the utensils, lighted the fire, and collected leaves and flowers for the daily *puja* (prayers and offerings to the deity). Such of the devotees as came to the temple to offer prayers looked at her with wonder but were dismayed to note that such a tender girl had been drafted to perform daily chores in the temple. But years later, when her charms began to unfold and her curves became more prominent, she was assigned more arduous duties such as lighting the *chilum* (hookah; pipe) whose fumes almost suffocated her, prepare the meals for Ramdas, serve glasses of *tari* to the master's guests and friends. She hated those rascals who eyed her with lascivious eyes. But she muted her thoughts and cursed the day when she was whisked away from the protecting care of her mother. She thought to revolt and break loose from the dungeon. Her lodging was no better than a dungeon, but the roving eyes of Ramdas instilled fear in her mind and atrophied all plans of escape.

While coming up the temple steps from a bath in the Burhi Gandak Ratna almost bumped against Thikedar Ramautar. "Is that you, Ratna?" The Thikedar grinned. "How pretty you look in your wet clothes?"

Ratna did not tarry. She quickly cut across the courtyard, entered her room and bolted the door from inside. "The scum," she said to herself. "May the devil take him."

Outside Ramautar waited for a while and then proceeded to Ramdas's cottage to have a drink or two. Strange friends they were. One an old man of sixty two and the other a youngman of twenty-six. But perhaps different reasons brought them together. Ramdas wanted to be courted and looked upon as the leading light of Dighra, next to Natwarlal, the zemindar. He wanted adulation, respect and hero-worship. Ramautar on the other hand wanted to infiltrate into Implipatti with Ramdas's help and make use of the Paltaniyas when the occasion demanded. Another more pressing reason was Ratna, whose ravishing features had inflamed his passion, just as Dudhia of Mahmuda had. He wanted both the beauties to be at his beck and call. But here he had miscalculated. Ratna was no carbon copy of Dudhia.

THE HOUSEHOLD AND THE EXORCIST

Came November. Suddenly there was a joyous atmosphere in Benu's house. Sister Shobha got a new frock and Sita got a new sari. Benu had a new short, a shirt and a pair of new shoes. In the evening he strode into the playground clad in his new outfit. Desho and Bhute looked at Benu with some surprise. Benu felt a sort of elation and pride. Soon Benu came to know that preparations were afoot for the marriage of his Dada. Then there would be marriage of his sister, Sita, at Benaras. They would have to go by train—a prospect which delighted Benu very much.

One day his brothers went by rail. "Dada has gone to bring a bride," Shobha said. "They'll return in two or three days." And sure enough the marriage party was back one day. A huge Bettiah-brake (a kind of horse-drawn carriage) drawn by four horses halted before their quarter. Benu noticed that along with his Dada a young handsome bride descended from the carriage. She was dressed in red silk and heavily ornamented. She had a vermilion mark on her forehead. There was blowing of conches by the assembled women-folk. Some were making full-throated noises with their tongues.

"What's that?" Benu asked an excited Shobha. "That's Ulu," she said. "When you bring your bride there will be a similar welcome for you too." Benu did not reply. Seated on the mahogany bed of Mejoma Benu most perfunctorily watched the function.

That night there was a feast in the house.

One fine morning Benu was dressed up by Shobha. He wore a white shirt and a khaki short. He had white socks and a pair of black shoes "Benu you're going to High School today with Krishna," Shobha said. "I know. But how far is the school?" Benu asked. "I don't know but I can give you some hints," Shobha said. "First you go to Naulakha. Then to Lal office (red-coloured Central Office). Then to Penj Ghar. Then to Post Office. From there a straight road will lead you to the High School."

At the appointed time Benu bowed before Mejoma, his Dada, his Bowdidi (sister-in-law), his sisters and took their blessings. A turmeric mark with a bit of curd was placed on his forehead. This was said to be a sign of good omen. Then with a deep bow before the goddess Kali in the Puja room, Benu set off for school in the company of his friend, Krishna. Waini High English School was a good three miles off from his house.

The school was an E-shaped pucca structure with big airy rooms and

big windows. The class-teacher sat on a raised platform. Behind him was a black-board framed on the wall. Two long canvas fans called *punkhas* hung from the ceiling. During summer time two small urchins sat outside the class room and pulled the *punkhas* with a rope tied to the two ends. When the urchins dozed, the class-teacher shouted at them and the *punkha* boys got up with a start and pulled the *punkhas* more briskly. Seated on his bench Benu could see the azure sky through the open window. The green paddy fields extending up to the horizon seemed to beckon him to an unknown kingdom.

The Headmaster was Amrit Lal. Benu did not like his sombre face. When he walked on the corridor everybody bowed to him in silence. No body could loiter outside the class-room. Anwar Saheb was the English teacher. He was always immaculately dressed in a suit with a matching tie. A mere five feet three inches tall, Anwar Saheb walked with a brisk gait and was conscious of the attention paid to him by his pupils whenever he passed through the corridor. He spoke in an anglicised accent which it was difficult for the students to comprehend. But the most volatile teacher was Samar Bhattacharya. He did not wield the rod; he wielded the hand. If one failed to give the correct meaning of a highly sanskritised Bengali word in *Sitar Vanabhas* (a book written in Bengali by Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar) up went his hand to grab the hair. And the "Operation Hair Splitting" was so swift and hard that invariably a few hairs would get uprooted and stuck in Samar Babu's hands. Once Samar Master boxed Benu's ears so ruthlessly that blood oozed out from his damaged ear. That evening Benu lay on bed in pain. When his Dada heard of the incident, he cycled to the residence of the Headmaster and complained about the barbaric treatment meted out to the pupils by the gruffy Samar Bhattacharya *alias* *goofo* (one having a big moustache). From that day onwards, presumably after a reprimand by the Headmaster, Samar Babu became more circumspect in his dealings with tender boys.

What interested Benu most after the school hours was the interclass football competition for the two cups—the Inspector of School's cup for senior classes and the Director's cup for the junior classes. Due to his poor health Benu did not take part in games but he watched the matches from the side-lines. His Dada did the refereeing. Benu sometimes wondered how he managed to run about the field bare-footed with a whistle in his mouth supervising a keenly contested match between two rival teams. Benu felt great because his brother was acting as the Umpire, a sort of Judge whose decisions were unquestionable. Another event of spectacular nature which generated much enthusiasm in the Naulakha colony was the Annual Sports Meet organised by the School Management on the Armistice Day, the 11th December. The man behind

the show was Pandeyji, the first Headmaster of the Waini School, who organised the show with an efficiency which won the praise of everybody present. Benu loved to see his elder brother, Khokun, compete in almost every event and win lots of cups and medals. When the sport ended Benu would cling to his brother, who gave him some of the trophies to be carried home.

Some two years after his admission to the High school, Benu observed that the atmosphere in the house had become most uncongenial. His sisters were growing up and with their growth Mejoma's anger also grew. Benu could not find any rational explanation for Mejoma's behaviour. For trivial faults she pulled Sita and Shobha by the hair and spanked them. "You cursed ones," she would roar, "why didn't you die?". Benu couldn't bear this inhuman treatment meted out to his sisters. He would collect a few pieces of soft coke from the coal dump in the courtyard and hurl them towards Mejoma. "You son of a Satan," Mejoma would spit fire and make a dash towards Benu with a broomstick. But Benu was too agile for her. He would climb up the guava tree and perch himself on a branch beyond the reach of Mejoma. "Come down, and I'll teach you a lesson," Mejoma would growl and vanish from the scene.

*

On a summer day Benu learnt that his married sister, Radha, who was elder to Sita, had arrived. From muffled talks between Shobha and Sita. Benu came to know that his sister was not in the best of health. Her wits had left her, the result of continuous torture by a villainous mother-in-law and the indifference of her husband, Raghunath. She became violent at times and had to be locked in. One day Benu saw his sister from a distance. Her eyes lacked lustre. She was terrified like a hunted deer. There was hardly any flicker of smile in her lips. She sat tongue-tied for a while, and then burst into sudden sobs and pulled her hairs and clothes. Benu shrieked and ran in terror. Just then Mejoma ran into the room and held Radha tightly. The P.W.D. Burra Sahib's wife, who lived across the road, was sent for. She came and put some strips of wild leaves on Radha's head. Shrieks alternating with laughter grated on Benu's ears as he crouched on bed in another room.

One day an Ojha (exorcist) was summoned. It was a momentous day in so far as Radha was concerned. The courtyard was swept clean. A site was prepared for the performance of the Puja. Leaves of bananas were spread on the ground and small quantities of rice, pulses and vegetables were kept thereon. Other items for the witch-hunting rites included oils

and butter, spices, dried chillies, curd and honey and a few varieties of fruits, ripe and unripe. At sundown came the Ojha, a darksome figure, with matted hair, a necklace of beads around his neck and a vermilion mark on his forehead. He took his seat on a deer skin and uttered some mantras. Benu clung to Shobha at the far end of the courtyard. A small crowd had assembled to witness the witch-expelling phenomenon. The Ojha lit up a fire and then put some dried chillies on it. Thereafter Radha was brought to the enclosure. The light of the fire, as it burned, showed on her face and made her look almost unearthly. She sat down mechanically without a glance to the left or to the right. She stared at the fire and sat petrified. The Ojha asked for a big stone which was used in the household for grinding purposes. This was brought and kept near the fire. The Ojha looked at Radha and asked:

"You evil spirit ! Are you going or not?"

Radha said "No", as if in a trance.

"No? Here's broomstick for you," said the Ojha beating the broomstick three times on the ground. "Now will you leave?" Radha said: "No, no. I'm not leaving."

Then placing a brick before Radha the Ojha shouted: "See this brick. I'll break your head. Will you leave now."

Radha hesitated. Then she lifted the brick in her right hand and threw it in the direction of the courtyard door.

"He's gone, he's gone," shouted the Ojha. "The evil spirit has gone."

The events were too onerous for Radha, who swooned on the spot. What followed was utterly inexplicable to Benu. Radha slept, talked and behaved like a normal person. Everybody was happy. Dada talked of sending Radha to her husband's place.

One day Shobha said to Benu: "Didi is going tomorrow."

"Where to?"

"To Sasur Bari (Father-in-law's place)".

"Where's that?"

"Far way off. She's to go by train."

So Radha departed. Benu never heard of her any more. One day he was told that his sister Radha had died and that her husband had married again.

VIII IN DUDHIA'S HUT

Waini Bazar was a cluster of mud-brick houses along both sides of a narrow cobbled road. Shibram's grocery was in the middle of the bazar. Facing it was Baiju's tailoring shop. Touching the tailor's shop was Bankelal's sweet shop. Bankelal sat on a high stool and fanned himself furiously. Within a glass-cased almirah he exhibited the *pedas*, the *barfis* and *besan-ka-ladoos* (different varieties of sweets) on brass *thalis* (plates). When there was no customer in his *halwai* shop, Bankelal dozed and dozed. At other times he exchanged pleasantries with occasional visitors.

"So the Thikedar is having an affair with the *achchut* (untouchable) girl?" Bankelal said glancing mischievously at Rambriksh, who hailed from Mahmuda and was supposed to be quite knowledgeable. "Damn the Thikedar and damn his paramour. What do we care? We are small fries, Lala. Why should we bother about the doings of the highups? Let me have a *chchatak* (about 10 grams) of *batasha* (sugar candy). Bankelal was crest-fallen as he could not elicit much news from Ramua, *alias* Rambriksh.

A few yards away was a mud house with *khapra* (tiled) roof. It had an inner courtyard and three dimly lit rooms. Those who were familiar with the topography of the Waini bazar knew this to be a favourite haunt of some Naulakha Babus who frequented the place every evening to slake their thirst. Whether they came there for intoxicating brew or for the sales woman, Dudhia, nobody could say with certainty. But men like Bankelal had noticed young and old Babus and majdoors, making a bee-line for the courtyard where Dudhia sat before a counter, poured out drinks to customers and collected the coins on behalf of her father, Sundar Pasi. Sundar had left this unauthorised toddy shop at the hands of his daughter and himself spent the evenings at the local *bhati-khana* (Wine-shop).

A charming woman of twentyfive, Dudhia looked pretty attractive with her flowing curves, a sweet round face and a pair of sparkling eyes. She was unusually fair, a trait uncommon in her tribe, and bore a determined look. She could be soft and stern at the same time. She could attract and repulse with equal case. No one could say whether she had given her heart to anyone, or had chosen to remain single and continue to be doted upon. Her day began in the evening when customers started trooping in one by one by the back-door and sat on wooden benches with earthen glasses before them. Dudhia poured the drinks to them and sat behind the counter and heard their daily gossips. Ayodhya Prasad, a

Fieldman in the Farm Office at Naulakha, had found a pliable companion in Foto Babu. He was narrating his tale of woe. "That Assistant Estate Manager, the son of a bitch, is in league with the Thikedar," Ayodhya Prasad told his companion. "So what? What harm has he caused to you, brother? Drink, drink and forget everything—office, home, wife, everything," Foto Babu drawled.

"It's no laughing matter," Ayodhya Prasad thumped the table as he spoke. "He's robbing the poor. That blooming Thikedar gets rupees ten every month from the *Sarkar* (government) for paying to each *majdoor*. He gives rupees five to each and eats away the balance in collusion with the Assistant Estate Manager. Isn't that scandalous?" Foto Babu goggled through his half-closed eyes. "Five rupees! That's too much. How many *katyas* (jugs of toddy) would that be?" "Damn your *katyas*," growled Ayodhya Prasad. "I'll prick this bubble; yes, I'll. Whole day, come rain, come storm I've to work in the fields collecting samples. And what do I get? Fifty bucks. But this bloke of a Thikedar is minting money. More than ten times of what I get." Foto Babu sympathised with Ayodhya Prasad. Poor chap. While Ayodhya laboured in the fields Foto Babu closed himself in the dark room of the Botany Department washing and developing photo films.

Sohanlal and Dhaniram were neighbours in Naulakha township. Dhaniram was a widower and Sohanlal, although married, had been separated, though not legally, from his wife. With no cares at home the pair spent merry evenings at Dudhia's shop, which they called "Dudhia Ashram." In between several glasses of *tari* the two Babus cast amorous glances towards the fair lady, who, however, sat tongue-tied but with ears alert on the high stool behind the counter.

"Isn't she quite a game?" asked Sohanlal

"That's right but she's not your game," whispered Dhaniram.

"She's Ramautar's would-be wife."

"Wife? My foot, How can she be his wife? At best she can be his mistress," said a highly exasperated Sohanlal. He was for purity in matters like love and marriage. But Dhaniram goaded him and almost made him cantankerous.

"Do you know what Ramautar did?" Dhaniram eyed his friend with apparent delight.

"What?"

Seated at the counter Dudhia strained her ears. She wouldn't like to miss any news concerning the Thikedar.

"You don't know?" Dhaniram said to Sohanlal. "Everybody knows in Naulakha. It's concerning Durga, the daughter of the tally clerk, Shivilal, who has his quarters near the Bairia Dhaf. Poor Shivilal! With a sick wife and three grown-up daughters he's in a tight spot. He's no money to marry off his daughters.

Now there comes the saviour..."

"Who?," asked Sohanlal, who was now tense with excitement.

"Who else, but the noble Thikedar Sahib," quipped in Dhaniram looking at Dudhia who, despite her radiant health, suddenly went pale.

"People say," continued Dhaniram, "that Durga was seen one evening in the company of Ramautar in Bairia Dhaf. Her clothes were dishevelled, her hairs were all loose and flying, and her eyes were red with sobs and tears. And that Ramautar..."

"What did he do? Why do you stop at the middle? Out with it." Sohanlal had another glass of the drink.

"And that Ramautar," said Dhaniram raising his voice a little, "was stroking Durga's cheeks."

Sohanlal uttered a four-lettered defamatory word which seemed to upset the lady of the house. Dudhia fidgeted nervously on her stool. She was obviously deeply hurt. Just then the courtyard door opened and Thikedar Ramautar sailed in. Dhaniram and Sohanlal dropped their unfinished cups and ran for the exit as fast as their legs could carry. And in the confusion they forgot to collect their shoes.

As soon as Ramautar entered the low-roofed room in the shop Dudhia closed the door from within. Here was her exclusive customer, others having vacated the premises. The Thikedar took off his shoes, unbuttoned his coat, and lay down on the *charpai*(cot) to relax. He looked tired, perhaps the result of a hectic day in Naulakha. Dudhia knew too well that nothing but a tumbler of *tari* would revive the drooping spirits of the Thikedar. She hastily brought a glass and filled it with the foaming liquor. Ramautar took a sip and looked at the crouching figure of Dudhia at the foot of the cot.

"Why Dudhia? That's not the place for you. Your place is here," said Ramautar pointing to his chest. But Dudhia did not move. Today she was not going to be befooled by the sugar-coated words of the Thikedar.

"Who's Durga?" Dudhia asked without moving.

"Durga?" Ramautar was taken aback by the abruptness of the question. Then he looked at Dudhia more intently and sensed that some-

thing was wrong. But a clever actor as he was, Ramautar laughed. Then he poured some more drink into the glass and sat up on the cot with Dudhia sitting at the foot of the bed.

"You are meaning that Shivilal's daughter, Durga. Isn't it?," Ramautar asked.

"Yes," said Dudhia, "You're stroking her cheeks. Isn't it correct?". Dudhia blurted. There was fire in her eyes.

"That's a lie," Ramautar flared up. "It's a downright lie. Who told you this cock and bull story?"

Dudhia did not divulge the source of her information. She was clever enough to realise that Ramautar would swear, curse and make an imaginary gesture of breaking the skull of the purveyor of the news, true or false, once he was informed about the gossip she heard in the courtyard.

"But tell me whether it's true or not". Dudhia insisted. What Ramautar told appeared to be convincing. Reports of illegal felling of trees had reached the ears of the Estate Manager, Brijlal Babu. Ramautar was asked to keep a watchful eye and apprehend illegal fellers. One evening he was on his usual round in the Bairia Dhaf area. At the bend of the road leading to the jungle he spotted two figures—a male and a female—locked in a deep embrace. Sensing that the rendezvous of the couple was a dangerous one, being close to the haunts of predatory animals, Ramautar gave a loud shout and moved swiftly towards the amorous pair. Realising that they were being watched, the man sprang up and instead of darting towards the intruder. i.e Ramautar, bolted towards the deeper recesses of the Bairia Dhaf, leaving his lady-love Durga in an embarrassing state and almost on the brink of a hysteria. In the dim light Ramautar could recognise that the fleeing person was no other than Harish Chunder, the compounder in the Waini hospital, who was the father of two children and the husband of a sickly wife. Ramautar conducted the weeping Durga to her house and explained to her father Shivilal the circumstances in which he found his daughter. He cautioned Shivilal to beware of that perfidious compounder and prevent his immoral advances to his daughter, Durga. "It's strange," said Ramautar to Dudhia, "that a good act is often misconstrued by interested people and distorted beyond measure to suit their personal ends."

That evening Dudhia felt a sort of elation which she never experienced before. She flung herself on Ramautar's bosom and wept profusely.

IX

RIPPLES IN MAHMUDA

Ramu came running from the Mahmuda bazar and broke the astonishing news. A Sadhu Baba, he said, was camping near the Shiva temple and lots of people were coming to have his *darshan* (audience).

"How does he look?", Sumitra asked.

"A tall figure with red bulging eyes, matted hair and a flowing beard. His body is besmeared with ashes. He sits on a deer skin. A *kamandul* and *trishul* lie in front of him," Ramu rattled off the description.

"What does he say?"

"He says nothing. Sits with eyes closed in *dhyana* (meditation). People say he's a *Jyotishi* (astrologer)."

"Humbug." Sumitra commented, brushing away the news of the Sadhu's appearance as matter of no consequence.

Ramanand had heard the conversation between Ramu and Sumitra sitting in his study. He came out and said. "No, Sumitra, all Sadhus are not humbugs. Haven't you heard of that saint of Dakhsineswar—Ramakrishna Paramhansa—who was said to be a crank in his mundane life before he became a priest in Rani Rashmoni's temple. Gadadhar—that was his worldly name—used to display symptoms which were commonly to be discerned in people when their wits go hay-wire. But that Gadadhar was a gem hidden in a heap of straw. When the trappings were removed it burst forth with a new effulgence. The radiance that he emitted attracted tens of thousands devotees. And one of them was no other than Swami Vivekananda, whom you adore so much."

"I'm sorry," said Sumitra. "I think we'll go and have a look at the Sadhu Baba."

Leaving Sujata in the custody of Ramjiwan, Ramanand and Sumitra went to the Gaurishankar temple, where under a sprawling *Peepal* tree sat the unknown Sadhu, deep in meditation. A huge crowd had gathered and sat at a respectable distance forming a semi-circle. There were those who were curious or intent on witnessing a *tamasha* (fun). There were also a few who sought to have Baba's blessings to ward off the evil spirits. A few self-seekers were also there. Ramanand observed that Ramautar, the Thikedar, and Ramdas, the temple administrator were among the motley crowd of men and women. Babu Viswanath Prasad and his daughter Shukantala had positioned themselves at some distance

from the crowd. The faith of the rural folks in all things occult was so deeply ingrained that no sacrifice was considered too great for propitiating a Sadhu. Many had brought their choicest vegetables; some had brought freshly plucked bananas; others had brought fresh buffalo milk so that the Baba might quench his thirst. All waited in baited breath for the Baba to open his eyes. Moments seemed interminable. Suddenly on the road near the temple gate arrived a phaeton driven by the zemindar of Dighra—Natwarlal. All eyes instantaneously turned towards that *achkan*-clad spruced up figure whose presence in that congregation appeared a trifling awkward. Ramautar and Ramdas hastily approached the zemindar and made a deep bow.

"Bandegi Huzoor."

"Bandegi. What's up here?." Natwarlal asked.

"They say that the Sadhu Baba can foretell the past, the present and the future. But he hasn't opened his mouth as yet," said the Thikedar.

"Psh! A thug masquerading as a seer."

Scarcely had Natwarlal concluded his unsavoury comment when all of a sudden a deep brass sound, almost like the thunder, broke forth—"Har Har Bom Bom, Har Har Bom Bom" from the cavernous mouth of the Sadhu, a tempestuous sound which echoed and reechoed in the empty spaces surrounding the Shiva temple. The congregation of devotees roared in unison—"Har Har Bom Bom". When the cadence died down, the Baba raised his hairy hand and said in a deep sonorous voice:

"I'm a *sanyasi*. I can't accept any gifts. I'll like to tell you that those that are sinful will soon perish. Those who lead pious life will flourish. God will protect them from all dangers. Nine years from hence a terrible catastrophe will engulf you. That's what the stars foretell. There would be a conjunction of six planets and that would spell disaster."

"What kind of disaster?" queried the Thikedar.

"Well, it could be war, a devastating flood, an epidemic, or a terrible earthquake. I see it's coming", the Baba said with eyes closed.

None ventured to ask any further question. One by one the assembled people left the place hoping to have a second *darshan* in the following morning.

"Gobar meh lat" (a kill-joy), cursed the Thikedar. "He has spoiled our mood." Ramautar and Ramdas mounted the *tumtum* and followed the zemindar riding in his phaeton.

"What did the Baba mean?" asked Sumitra as she proceeded homewards in the company of her husband. Ramanand was in deep contemplation. The words of the Sadhu were ringing in his mind: "Those that lead a pious life will flourish." Sumitra's query jolted Ramanand. "What the Baba meant," Ramanand was telling, "was that we must all live a virtuous life. A virtuous life means a life dedicated to the good of others. Sumitra, from now onwards we should do something worthwhile, something to help the weak and the indigent. God had given us enough. Let's see if we can be of any use to others." Sumitra looked up at her husband. A beam of light thrown up by the setting sun irradiated his youthful face. "May you succeed in your mission," she said softly as they reached the garden gate.

Next morning when some of the villagers came to have a *darshan* of the Baba they were sorely disappointed. There was no trace of the Sadhu. The temple priest said that the baba was still at his *moun* (silence) when he retired after midnight to his *kutia* (hut).

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For three consecutive days it rained heavily in Waini and the surrounding villages. It was the month of July. The Burhi Gandak, usually emaciated during winter months, rapidly increased in bulk. Her bosom expanded and heaved. They said that the *Burhia* (old woman) had become young again. As part of her youthful frolics she struck on the right bank where the Naulakha township lay. As chunks of soft earth came tumbling down, the Naulakha people brought huge boulders and threw them on the waters. Then they felled giant trunks of trees and piled them on the boulders. Hundreds of perspiring *majdoors* (labourers) toiled with cross-bars, pick-axes to stem the on-rushing waters. Sand bags in hundreds were dumped to plug the breach. Brijlal Babu, the Estate Manager, Kumer Saheb, the Engineer, Dhanik Ram, the Overseer-all supervised the flood control operation. The Babus watched from a distance the gruelling fight between nature and man. Thikedar Ramautar was giving commands: "Hey. Here. Here. Throw the bags here. Jhuman, bring some logs and dump them here. *Burhia kabu me nahi ati* (the old woman doesn't come under control)." By old woman Ramautar meant the Burhi Gandak river which seemed to defy all attempts to contain her.

On the Mahmuda side there was brisk activity on the river front. As yet there was no danger to the village. But who could tell? Ramanand Mishra had collected some fifty able-bodied men and posted them at strategic places should there be any danger of overflowing. Ramua brought the news that Thikedar Ramautar was supervising the flood control work at Naulakha.

"Isn't that strange?", said Ramanand Mishra to Bashir Khan, who was an expert in the behavioural pattern of the Burhi Gandak. "Neglecting his own *gaon* (village) and serving a foreign master." Basir Khan smiled. Times had changed. People forgot their hearths and homes and migrated to better lands in search of jobs. As a result, the villages languished. Basir Khan had seen seventy summers. He had seen many ups and downs. The Burhi Gandak had sometimes won. Sometimes she was bridled. But this time the battle seemed to be evenly matched. Surveying the swirling waters Basir Khan touched his flowing beard and said to Ramanand:

"Huzoor; We must protect the bund (embankment). Let's cut down the trees and stack them on the side of the bund."

"Yes, we must also bring the boulders from the *tilla* (ridge) and dump them.

"Let all men work ceaselessly till the water level subsides," Ramanand said.

Suman Majhi shouted: "To the forest. Let's chop the trees and bring the logs here on bullock-carts." Sumitra, who was watching the congregation from a distance, walked to the river front and signalled to the women – folk. "We'll work side by side with the men-folk. Let's all get down to work. Every family will be provided with rice from my own stock."

A thrill of joy electrified the men-folk. They formed teams to perform specific duties. Kumroo, Lotan, Shival, Dasrath and Muneer felled the trees and carried them to the bund. Jhumroo and Giyassudin manned two boats for any possible emergency. The womenfolk formed a relay team to transport rocks and stones to the bund-side where the men-folk worked round the clock. The virgin forest echoed with strokes of axes as five pairs of hands chopped and felled.

"Damn that Thikedar," said Kumroo. "Don't cut the tress that's what he had said." Dasrath laughed. "He won't have any wood for his funeral," he said gleefully.

"He's flirting with that witch Dudhia in Waini Bazar," said Lotan as he flexed his muscles to cut a giant tree.

Ramanand was everywhere—moving, guiding and commanding the *naujawns* (youngmen). "Throw the rocks here; pile up the sand-bags there; we should plug the leak," he shouted as more barricades came up.

But the Burhi Gandak was relentless. The muddy waters lapped on the fallen trees and tried to force a breach on the embankment.

"Plug the breach here," shouted Ramanand. More sand bags were dumped. More baskets-full of rocks and pebbles were hurled. The bare bodies of *naujawans* were slimy with perspiration. The women-folk wore of dishevelled look. Flecks of dust and lime had disfigured them all.

"There, there," shouted Ramanand, "Raghua has fallen into the water. Bring the boat Jhumroo." Before Jhumroo could manoeuvre the boat, Lotan majhi jumped into the raging waters, grabbed Raghua by his arms and brought him to the boat where Jhumroo picked him up.

"Har Har Bom Bom," shouted Ramanand.

"Har Har Bom Bom," echoed the hundreds of men and women assembled on the river front. A whole night vigil was kept.

As the first streaks of light broke from the eastern sky it became apparent that the waters had subsided.

Ramu brought the startling news that the P.W.D. Office in Naulakha had been flooded and some of the residential quarters were in knee-deep waters.

"Is there any casualty?", asked Ramanand.

"No," said Ramu. "But the Thikedar was telling the Burra Babu in Naulakha that the flooding of the Babu quarters was due to the *gaon-wallas* (villagers), who diverted the waters of the Burhi Gandak to this side of the Naulakha. He would teach a lesson to the *gaonwallas* soon."

Ramanand remembered the words of the Sadhu: "Those who live in sin will perish soon."

X

COMMOTIONS IN MAHMUDA AND WAINI

Chipiatoli, contiguous to Bhuskaul and Mahmuda villages, was in a ferment. Resason? The brutal and lethal attack by the Bengali doctor, Das Babu, on Kusmi, the wife of Roshanlal sweeper. Groups of villagers gathered under the *peepal* tree and discussed the incident. What should they do? They were weak and illiterate. They did not know the intricacies of law nor did they possess the wherewithal to claim compensation for the damages. Some one suggested that they should seek the support of Babu Ramanand Mishra, who always espoused the causes of the weak and the down-trodden. The opinion of the villagers crystallised in favour of approaching Babu Ramanand Mishra, whom they affectionately addressed as Mishraji.

Ramanand was at his kutchery when the deputationists from Chipiatoli met him with folded hands. They had also brought with them Roshanlal, the husband of the deceased Kusmi.

"Huzoor!", said Jamadar Hiralal. "This is Roshanlal. His wife, Kusmi, was eight months pregnant. Being in great pain she had visited the hospital for medicine. Her fault was that she was an *achchut* and she did not declare her caste to *Dagtar* (doctor) Babu. As she sat on the bench awaiting examination, someone came into the room and whispered something into the doctor's ear. After other patients had left, Das Babu called Kusmi and asked her about her caste. The poor woman had to admit that she was a sweeper-an *achchut*. The doctor flew into high rage and hurled abuses on Kusmi. 'You an *achchut* had the gumption to sit on the bench reserved for high caste people', that was what the doctor said. When Roshanlal entered the room—apparently he had heard the abuses being hurled on his wife—the *dagtar* peremptorily asked him to get away along with his wife. 'Huzoor, she's in great pain', pleaded Roshanlal. 'Damn her and damn her tribe', muttered the *dagtar* and as Roshanlal tried to intercede, the *dagtar* took him by the shoulder and threw him towards the door. As Kusmi got up to help her husband, the *dagtar* kicked at her abdomen and flung her out. Kusmi lay on the floor in excruciating pain for sometime and died soon after. Roshanlal came running to the village and narrated his tale of woe. Kusmi's body was at the hospital morgue. They did not report the matter to the police out of fear".

"What? Still at the hospital?" Ramanand flared up. "And you took no action to inform the police?"

"Huzoor, we're poor. We're afraid of the police".

Ramanand called his clerk and asked him to make all arrangements for the funeral. Then he turned towards Hiralal and Roshanlal and asked them if they would care to accompany him to police station to lodge F.I.R. Roshanlal looked towards his fellow villagers and being encouraged by them to accompany Mishraji, agreed to the proposal of Ramanand and Mishra. At the police station Roshanlal lodged a complaint stating the circumstances leading to the death of Kusmi. This being done, the police went to the senior doctor who caused an autopsy to be performed. Thereafter Kusmi's body was handed over to Roshanlal for the last rites.

Shouting "jai" to Mishraji the villagers trooped back and performed the cremation of the body on the bank of the Burhi Gandak.

In the evening when Ramanand narrated the day's incident to his wife, Sumitra, he failed to elicit from her any word of praise for all that he had done. "Do you think any good will come out of it?" Sumitra questioned.

"Why not? Who could help them if not the custodians of law and order?," said Ramanand Mishra.

"Poor people are always on the wrong side of the law. Also there are two sets of laws, one for the affluent and another for the indigent. Besides there are two sets of lawyers, one to make parties win and the other to make parties lose. Right or wrong they must have their fees," Sumitra said with an animation which surprised Ramanand.

"But one thing you shouldn't forget, Sumitra. The tragedy with the Harijans is that they have a deadly fear of the police. They're afraid to lodge even a genuine complaint with the police station. They think, and they must be right to some extent, that the police in the name of investigations, will descend on their households, turn things topsy turvy, harass and even molest the female members of the family and depart only on payment of some consideration. But mind you, this isn't the universal practice. Human nature being what it is there are always some persons of dubious integrity. The fear psychosis, which is deeply ingrained in the minds of the Harijans, has to be removed. They've to be taught that the law is for all, for the caste Hindus as well as for the Harijans. Whatever might be the result, I would like to see a change, a metamorphosis, in the mental make-up of an *achchut*," Ramanand paused for a moment and then said:

"I don't think Roshanlal's complaint would have any effect. Das Babu must have played his cards well."

Sumitra nodded. "That's exactly what I apprehend," she said. Two

days later, Lotan Majhi from Chipiatoli informed Ramanand Mishra near the bund that Roshanlal had withdrawn his plaint which he had lodged with the police. It was a completely voluntary withdrawal. He was also informed that Roshanlal was hosting a feast in Chipiatoli.

"To celebrate what?" asked Ramanand.

"For the successful culmination of the case. He's saying: one wife's gone, another would come; let's have a feast and drink to celebrate Kusmi's deliverance."

"Deliverance indeed!", Ramanand wryly commented and then wended his way through the dark alleys that led him to his house. Sumitra was right, Ramanand thought. It would be a long long uphill journey before these unlettered and unlearned villagers could be taught to discard the tattered robes of ignorance that sat so weightily on them.

*

There was commotion of another sort in Naulakha township. The one word that was uppermost in everybody's lips was Durga. While returning from work in the afternoon, Banwari noticed a small group crowding near the cooperative store and engaged in animated talks. Banwari was a clerk in the Central office, and hence called himself a Babu. But he was equally at ease in the company of farmhands and peons. In fact he was the conveyor of tidings from one section of employees to another. Ask Banwari as to what happened in the Peons' quarters in the Bairia Dhaf lines and he would come out with many saucy tales. In fact it was he who had circulated the news to the peons' quarters that Harish compounder was having an affair with the tally clerk's daughter, Durga. But somehow or other he had missed the later developments. So when he heard the name of Durga being mentioned by the residents of the Bairia Dhaf lines, he braked his cycle and joined the crowd.

"What's the matter, Sukhna?" Benwarilal asked the first person who met his eyes.

"*Gajab ho gaya* (strange thing has happened)", Sukhna said.

"Durga had disappeared".

"Disappeared?"

"Yes. Early in the morning, she left her house as others were asleep. She hasn't returned home as yet."

"Has Shivilal reported to the police?"

"Yes."

"Then what happened?"

"The Suprin Babu (Superintendent) called Thikedar Ramautar and made some enquiries. I don't know what happened", Sukhna said.

The truth was out by the night. Autopsy revealed that death was due to drowning. No foul play was suspected. The body had been handed over to Shivalal for cremation. What the police called "truth" was to the simple, unsophisticated workmen of Bairia Dhaf Lines patently "untruth". There were whispers that Harish compounder had bribed the police and the Bengali doctor in the hospital who performed the autopsy. Durga, they said, was pregnant and it was the chance meeting of the Thikedar Ramautar with the couple at Bairia Dhaf, which exposed the sinister nature of the alliance. They even suggested that Durga had entreated Harish compounder to marry her but that *harami* (bastard) had let her down. After her traumatic experience of the previous evening, Durga preferred death to dishonour. As society looked down upon un-wanted children of unmarried mothers, Durga ended her life and saved her parents from possible embarrassment.

Thikedar Ramautar got bouquets for his exposure of a sparkling scandal.

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There were two principal figures that mattered in Babu circles. One was the *Angrej* (English) Burra Sahib (big boss), who was the Director. And other was the *deshi* (Indian) Burra Babu (lesser boss), the Superintendent. Both had their offices in the brick-built Central office, which was popularly known as the Lal Office. Director McBride was not popular with the Babus. His countenance was such that he was an object of terror to the clerical staff. His accent was difficult to follow; he wore a pair of rubber-soled shoes and so softly did he move on the corridors that his presence was rarely felt. Unannounced he would walk into the General section off and on ostensibly to ask for a book or a file but really to keep an eye on the Babus at work. Parmanand Babu was unlucky to be nabbed by McBride while he had just taken out a *paan* (betel leaf) from his tinbox and started to chew it leisurely.

"What's that?" roared McBride, who had silently sailed into the section.

"Nothing Sir," Parmanand ejaculated the words with considerable difficulty inasmuch as he had stuffed his mouth with the *paan*.

"Nothing? Show me the tin-box," growled McBride and poor Parmanand had to obey. Scanning the contents of the *dibba* (box) the Burra Saheb scolded him, in the presence of his colleagues, for spoiling the premises with the nasty habit of *paan*-chewing. Although Parmanand Babu was generally careful to spit on the sand-filled wooden tray that lay under his table, stains of *paan* had indeed appeared on the floor which was the

immediate cause of McBride's outburst. The same afternoon Parmanand Babu was transferred to Record Section, a situation which was not very palatable to him.

Shibdas was the blithe spirit in the General Section. He was junior-most from the point of view age and was the most ebullient. Radhika Babu, Umesh Babu, Hariram Babu and even Biru Babu, the confidante of Burra Babu and the Steno of the Director, appreciated the sparkling wit of Shibdas and rejoiced with him in his caricatures of the Burra Saheb. i.e. McBride and the Burra Babu, who was no other than Superintendent Pinaki Babu alias *pekati*. The Babus had transformed Pinaki into *pekati*, which in Bengali means a lean and thin reed. Pinaki Babu looked very much as a withered reed and hence the appellation of *pekati*. Clad in silk trousers, a black buttoned-up alpaca coat, a black *topee* (hat) on his balding head and a greying moustache, Pinaki Babu strutted on the corridors of the Lal Office like the Indian edition of John Bull minus his pate. As if to make the distinction more pronounced Pinaki disdained the cigar and puffed at the favourite hookah, which he kept carefully concealed in the wooden almairah in his chamber, and which his personal peon, Gir-dhari, punctiliously lighted during the lunch interval, when the Burra Sahib motored to his residence for luncheon with his Scottish wife.

Shibu would show in action how Pinaki Babu would strut behind the Burra Sahib, his long alpaca coat dangling about his skinny body and his *topee* getting off the mark revealing his skinny top.

"Mr. McBride should be taught a lesson for humiliating Parmanand Babu," suggested Radhika Babu when they had assembled on the lawn during the lunch interval. Biru Dada was always brimming with funny ideas. He closed his eyes for a moment and said: "yes". "But how?," asked Yogin Babu. "By playing Holi," Biru Dada said with an air of gravity. "Playing Holi? Are you joking" said Hariram Babu. "No, I'm not," replied Biru Babu. "My plan is this, provided you all agree and promise to stand united. McBride comes to the General section mostly during the morning hours; then he visits other sections. When he would stand before my table, someone from behind would sprinkle red ink from his pen on the back of his coat. the movement of the pen should be so smooth and subtle that no part of the ink would stain his neck or head. But who would bell the cat?"

Shibdas was selected for the "Operation Holi McBride". Everyone promised to remain united, should there be any furore. On the following day, Bhola, the Peon attached to the General Section, was stationed outside the room. He was instructed to knock at the door as soon as he noticed that the Burra Saheb was on his usual morning round. It was agreed

that every one would be perusing the files or rattling the type-writers to convey the impression of a hard and sustained work. Shibu was to be ready with his ink-pots, one black and another red. The pen-holder was to be in his grip as he scribbled on the draft pad. Exactly at half-past ten there was a knock on the door. The zero hour was approaching. Count down started with thumping hearts. McBride walked into the room and stood before Biru Babu with a piece of paper which he wanted to be typed. His back was before Shibdas. Instantaneously Shibu dipped his pen into the red ink-pot and shrugged it so deftly that the ink from his pen splashed on McBride's white coat making a perfect parabola. As McBride moved out of the room there was muted laughter and a suppressed glee on the success of the "Operation Holi".

After the luncheon recess Burra Babu summoned Biru Babu and told him what had happened. Mrs. McBride was horrified to find stains of red ink on the back of her husband's coat. Since the stains were only on the back surely some rogue of a Babu must have done the mischief. "I would like the culprit to be tracked," Bura Babu thumped the table to show his displeasure. "In which sections did he go, Sir?", Biru Babu politely asked. "To General Section, then to Issue section, thereafter to Accounts section and finally to the Treasury." "Very well, Sir," replied Biru Babu. "I'll do my best to find out the culprit."

But nothing happened. There was so much tongue-in-cheek silence that Burra Babu could not ferret out anything. He tried to cajole Biru Babu and tried to get the truth out of him. "How do I know, Sir. The Sahib went to so many sections. We saw his coat spotlessly white when he walked out," Biru Babu told the Burra Babu without batting his eyelid. "Well, you all are very clever. but I'm sure the culprit is in the General Section." Bura Babu eyed Biru Babu with suspicion.

Burra Babu's investigations ended in a fiasco. But one thing resulted. McBride curtailed his daily visit to the sections much to the relief of the Babus. "Well done, Shibu," said Hariram Babu patting Shibu on the back. "Next time it would be a bloody Holi if the Gora Sahib tried to poke his nose into everything." Every-body had a hearty laugh.

Despite their isolation from the main stream of national life, the Naulakha Babus kept themselves abreast of the happenings in other parts of the country, from Peshawar in the west to Chittagong in the east. Thanks to the nationalist and non-nationalist newspapers they could get a more or less clear picture about the political climate then prevailing.

One day news came in the Post Office over the telegraph wire that Pandit Motilal Nehru had passed away. When Shibdas came from the Recreation club he was a picture of sadness. His fair, handsome, smiling face was clouded by some inexplicable sorrow. He lay down slowly on the easy chair while Mejoma hurried to his side with a palmyra *punkha*. Benu heard his Dada say: "Motilal Nehru is dead. News has just been received in the Post office."

Benu looked up at the pensive face of his brother. He heard his Mejoma say "sad, very sad". A sadness gripped Benu too. He had heard of Motilal Nehru, who he was told by his teachers at school, was a prince among men. Benu's friend, Bhute, used to say that Pandit Motilal Nehru was so rich that his clothes were periodically sent to Paris for ironing. Well, this might be a sheer gossip but nevertheless it did indicate euphemistically the extent of Panditji's affluence. What was most surprising about this man of wealth was his simplicity. He wore simple clothes—an ordinary white *achkan* (long coat) and white churidar *pajama*. Lately he started wearing a khadi *dhoti* and *kurti* with a *chadar* thrown over his shoulders. For head wear he preferred a white khadi cap—then popularly known as Gandhi cap.

"A great man he was," Benu heard his brother say to Mejoma who was an ordinary unsophisticated housewife distantly situated from the hub of events. But Mejoma listened with patience and occasionally wiped the tears from her eyes with the corner of her white course borderless sari, the apparel of a Hindu widow. "Pandit Motilal Nehru," Benu's Dada was saying, "sacrificed his flourishing practice at the Bar and gave up the comforts of the house to join the non-cooperation movement of Mahatma Gandhi. 'The British must go'. That was the slogan that he gave. 'They must be heckled and harassed, both within the Assembly and outside.' An obdurate Raj, determined to rule with a brute force, sent him to jail several times. He bore the sufferings patiently and never faltered. And what an eminent Parliamentarian he was. As the leader of the Swarajists he was the undisputed spokesman of his party in the Legislative Assembly chamber. His greatest gift to the nation—if a gift it was—was a young revolutionary, thoroughly Gandhian in outlook and belief. That was his son, Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru."

Benu knew that the Assembly was in New Delhi, some six hundred miles away. It was an enormous circular structure of stones and marbles, built recently, with several columns like the spikes of a huge umbrella. Within this building was a chamber where the leaders of the country, who were representatives of the people, debated issues of national importance. That was the chamber where Bhagat Singh had hurled a bomb to

give a shock to the conscience of the British Raj. Benu felt an irresistible urge to visit the hallowed chamber when he grew up. But would he ever live to see it? Delhi was so far off from Waini.

A condolence meeting was held in Waini Bazar to mourn the passing away of this illustrious son of India. Babu Ramanand Mishra presided. Gathered around him on the same platform were Lala Shibnarain, Babu Viswanath Prasad, Chaudhury Chhoteylal and others. Babu Ramanand Mishra made a short speech in which he alluded to the sterling qualities of the late Panditji, and exhorted the youngmen to emulate his example. "Greatness lies not in amassing wealth," he said, "but in making the proper use of it. And what could be a more productive head of expenditure than the welfare of the poor, the famished, the under-nourished and the under-dogs. It's not for nothing that he gave up his lucrative legal practice and responded to the clarion call of Mahatma Gandhi. A prince converted himself into a sadhu. His apparel was so simple, so unsophisticated that he could easily be mistaken for a common country gentleman. But the radiance that he emitted was..."

Hardly had Babu Ramanand Mishra completed the sentence when a shower of bricks and stones landed on the dias. Deeply incensed by the unprovoked attack, the assembled villagers took up their *sotas* (sticks) and ran towards the palm grove, which stretched out from the outskirt of the bazar, the venue of the condolence meeting. "Maro, Maro" (kill, kill) shouted the villagers as they darted towards the miscreants who were hurling stones and bricks from behind the palm trees. "What an outrage! What an ignominious and unprovoked assault. Those bloody hirelings, the stooges of the Raj, shouldn't be allowed to escape. Kill them all". The villagers shouted as they ran to nab the *goondas* (miscreants). But their chase proved to be futile. Their mission of disturbing the meeting having been completed, the trouble-makers had fled. But one familiar figure could be recognised by the pursuing team. It was the stocky lungi-clad figure of Kalua with a red *patti* (cloth piece) on his head. "*Sarkar ka chamcha* (sycophant of the Government)." cursed Lotan Majhi as he spat on the ground, and retraced his steps along with the weary fellows (farmers) after a fruitless trek.

With an unusual equanimity Ramanand Mishra had restored some sort of order among those who remained seated despite the fusillade of missiles. The audience stood up in silence for two minutes in the memory of the departed soul. "Motilal Nehru Amar Ho" cries rent the air.

XI STRIKE IN NAULAKHA

The farm hands in Naulakha were on a war-path. For months they were being fleeced by the Thikedar who recruited them and paid them their wages. Being illiterate, they affixed their thumb impressions on a sheet of paper in token of their having received their wages. They had, however, a lurking fear that they were not receiving their dues as the Thikedar was under-cutting them. Beggars could not be choosers and for a long period they suffered in silence. But their eyes opened when one morning Bholua, who had worked in Sabour Farm, near Bhagalpur, and had gathered enough knowledge about the tricks the Thikedars generally played, called all the labourers of Waini to a secret meeting and advised them to unite and fight for a better remuneration. "But how?," Rampreet, the more aged among the labourers, cornered Bholua. "Brother," said Bholua, "things are changing. Everywhere susal (socialist) parties are being organised. They go about with lal jhandas (redflags) and shout "no pay, no work". We'll go on a hartal (strike) until the Naulakha Sahebs give us more wages. Is it possible, in these days of soaring prices, to work on five or six rupees a month and that too on *sukha* (without provision)? Even the zemindars give more to their labourers, of course there the work is not of a continuous nature. So if you agree we'll tell the kamgars (labourers) of Dighra, Mahmuda and Bhuskaul to agree to a hartal." Bholua concluded his preroration while the assembled farm-hands shouted "Jai ho, Jai ho." "Not Jai ho," interrupted Bholua. "say ek ho (unite)"

Word soon spread to Dighra, Bhuskaul and Mahmuda about the determination of the Waini workers to go on a strike. Babu Viswanath Prasad watched the development with some consternation. What would happen if the Angrej Sarkar (British Government) imported labour from outside or used force to break the strike? No. the matter was too serious. The ignorant masses were being misled by someone who had imbibed neo-socialistic ideas without realisation of the pitfalls. They must be warned. Well, he had his duty to his villagers. He must consult Babu Ramanand Mishra and seek his advice.

Babu Ramanand Mishra had also learnt about the growing discontent among the labourers, who included all the sections of the community. It was a happy augury for the future, Ramanand thought, that all the communities had decided to unite and fight for a common cause. If this united approach prevailed on the national plane there was hope for early emancipation of the motherland from the chains of slavery. The words of

Vivekananda reverberated in his ears: "Awake, arise." For long the people had lain in slumber! Now had come the time to get up and forge ahead with clasped hands. Would the words of Gandhiji, Rajendra Babu and Jawaharlal Nehru fall on deaf ears? Awake brothers. Let's march to the battlefield, the country calls us. Ramanand soliloquised. While Ramanand Mishra was musing on the shape of things to come, Babu Viswanath Prasad walked in silently.

"Ram Ram Mishraji".

"Ram Ram." Ramanand got up to welcome his esteemed friend. "Now tell me what the matter is. You look worried."

Babu Viswanath Prasad took his seat and fanning himself with a hand-made *punkha*, he narrated the resolution of the farm labourers of Naulakha to go on a strike. "Would you approve of this?", he asked.

Ramanand Mishra answered suavely, "Yes, I have thought of it. It concerns the labourers of Mahmuda also. Now only two courses are open to the farm-hands. First, to seek a settlement with the Naulakha authorities. If they refuse to listen, well, the choice is theirs. Second, the farmers must weigh the consequence before deciding on the course of action. The Angrej Sarkar may make a lathi charge on the strikers. They may bring in the mounted police to intimidate them. The workers must be prepared to face the possible onslaught."

"No. They can't be allowed to be belaboured by the insensible Sarkar," Babu Viswanath Prasad said with some emotion.

"Viswanath Babu," said Ramanand Mishra sensing the feelings of his friend, "for how long can the poor suffer this exploitation, this calculated thuggery? What are their wages? A bare pittance. If negotiations fail, they must resort to a peaceful hartal. I know the farm-hands are poor, the condition of the Harijans among them is most deplorable. If the strike proves to be a protracted one, then they will be hit the hardest. They will die of hunger; even if they don't die, they will be forced to sell their belongings to the Sahukar and become beggars."

Babu Viswanath Prasad suggested that a meeting be held in Ramanand Mishra's house where the representatives of Mahmuda, Dighra, Waini and Bhuskaul may be invited to discuss the matter in all ramifications. In the meantime Ramanand Mishra might meet the Naulakha authorities to explore the possibilities of averting the impending strike.

Two days later a meeting was duly held in Ramanand Mishra's house. Thikedar Ramautar was invited but he did not attend. From Dighra Babu Ramdas came to the meeting. Lala Shishnarain appeared on behalf of the

Waini labourers dwelling outside Naulakha limits. Two leading labourers from each community also attended the meeting. Ramanand Mishra informed the gathering that he had taken up the question of payment of increased wages to the *kamgars* but the Burra Saheb of Naulakha had informed him that it was a matter between the Thikedar and the workers. The Thikedar got a lumpsum amount from the Government and he was competent to give increased wages to the labourers recruited by him, if he so liked. Also the Thikedar was at liberty to ask for a revision of the contract with the Government when the time for the next revision came. Babu Ramdas, who was rather chummy with the Thikedar, flatly opposed the strike idea. The Naulakha farm-hands, he said, were better paid than farm-hands working anywhere else.

But the representatives of the *kamgars* were firmly committed to the strike proposal. There was little that Babu Viswanath Prasad or Babu Ramdas could do. The consensus was in favour of the strike. Babu Ramanand Mishra, however, warned the workers that they must tighten up their belts and be prepared for a protracted strike. "Got knows what will happen," Viswanath Babu said with a sigh.

So it was agreed that the workers would go on a strike for wage-revision after giving a notice of a week to the Naulakha authorities. "Well, if any section of the *kamgars* withdrew unilaterally from the agreement reached today, it would be severely dealt with," cautioned Babu Ramdas as he left the meeting. He must brief the Thikedar about the developments.

Thikedar Ramautar pooh-poohed the strike threat. "They haven't clothes to wear, bread to eat and even proper shelters over their heads, and they talk of going on a strike," he laughed merrily as he passed on the tumbler of *tari* to Ramdas. "It's no laughing matter, Ramautar", said Ramdas. "Why don't you patch up with the disgruntled elements and give them a little more? A strike is a serious thing. Think of it before it's too late." Apparently his word of advice fell flat on Ramautar's ears.

During all these confabulations Bholua emerged as the real leader—the man of the masses. He had learnt the tactics from the *susal* (socialist) leaders of Patna. First, give a strike notice; if the authorities refuse to talk, then put down tools and don't come to work. If the Police are alerted, then go underground leaving the poor defenceless farmers at the mercy of the authorities. Leave the scene of trouble and re-appear in some other village to sow the seeds of discontent. That's the way to spread the "*susal*" ideology among the ill-informed villagers.

Babu Viswanath Prasad had another meeting with Babu Ramanand Mishra. The zero hour was fast approaching and the details had to be finalised soon. The strike, he emphasised, should be confined to farm-labourers and domestic aides like cooks, butlers, and servants. The boatmen and the milkmen as also the *bhangis* (sweepers) should be left out. Public health was too serious a matter to be interfered with. "What worries me most," said Viswanath Prasad, "is the ability of the weaker sections of the people, viz. Harijans, to put up a sustained fight. Cracks may soon develop in the united bastion." "Let's see how things develop," Ramanand Mishra said, "perhaps better sense may prevail and the authorities may relent."

Of all persons in Mahmuda the happiest was Chaudhuri Chhoteylal, the Sahukar. He saw visions of prosperity, a virtual windfall. Bereft of daily wages during the strike period, the striking labourers would willy-nilly come to him for loans to stave off starvation. The saying that "an army marches on its belly" is equally applicable to the army of strikers.

Sumitra Devi was downcast when she heard the news of the impending strike. A mother's heart could feel the swells in another mother's heart. The men-folk were too selfish, too inconsiderate. They did not realise how the household was managed. Back from work the bulk of the workers thronged the *bhati-khana* (liquor shop) to have a sip or two. Good money was drained down the gullet in the shape of drinks. Result? Borrowings from the Sahukar. If money was not forthcoming they beat the women-folk. Sumitra shuddered to think what would happen if the thoughtless, gullible labourers belaboured their wives and daughters for their failure to provide money for the purchase of their daily round of drinks. No. She must persuade her husband to put a stop to this mad venture. She got her chance after Sujata had retired to bed for the night.

"Is this talk about strike true?" She asked her husband. Ramanand was taken aback. So Sumitra had also heard the news. "Yes, it's true", he said. "But what is it that worries you?"

"What worries me? It's the mother's worries for her child. How can her mother feed her young ones if the bread-earner is without job?"

"But a situation like this has to be faced," Ramanand said. "Look Sumitra, aren't you aware of the extent of sufferings, torture and humiliation of the satyagrahis under Gandhiji's leadership in South Africa? Why South Africa? Take our own land. The Jallianwala Bagh tragedy is fresh in everybody's mind. Why have leaders like Motilal Nehru, Tilak and Lajpat Rai faced the police batons and lathi charges without any retaliation? Because they believed in a cause. That cause is India's

independence. The Congress Party adopted the resolution only the other day on the bank of the Ravi that 'Purna Swaraj' (complete independence) is our goal and January 26 should be celebrated every year as the independence day. For bigger causes personal sacrifices shall have to be made."

"That's all right," Sumitra said. "Why do the leaders of the men not join the fray instead of doling out pious advices to the poor unlettered *kisans*, who have no power to think rationally as to what is right and what is wrong?"

Ramanand could not resist a laugh. "So that's what's worrying you, dear. All right, when the time comes, the leaders wouldn't hold on to the apron-strings of their wives. They would be in the forefront. But I may assure you that not a single worker in Mahmuda would die of starvation because of the strike. My granaries are there to feed the hungry and the destitutes. But if the strike fizzles out due to internal bickerings, I wouldn't like to hold myself in ransom. But something within me tells that right will triumph over wrong."

"O, dear "Sumitra heaved a sigh of relief as he clung to her husband who embraced her most affectionately.

The notice period of seven days was over. From early morning groups of workers began collecting in Dighra, Bhuskaul and Mahmuda. They were to march in separate groups to the Waini bazar, close to the Naulakha gate, and assemble for a *bhakan* (lecture) by their leaders. In Bhuskaul the enthusiasm was particularly infectious. From the verandah of the thatched houses the women-folk awaited in baited breath to see the procession wending through the narrow cobbled lanes. Urchins perched themselves on trees to have a better view. It was something unprecedented. The old and the infirm sat down on logs of wood on the roadside in anticipation of the *julus* (procession).

"They're coming. They're coming," shouted Sonua, the son of the village blacksmith. All eyes craned eastwards. Sure enough, about two hundred workers were marching on the dusty road with small banners.

"Lal jhanda (red flag). Lal jhanda," shouted Vrinda, the son of Jogia *mistry* (mason), who had taken up a vantage point on a peepal tree.

But where was the procession going? To the surprise of all onlookers the processionists stopped near the *kutia* (hut) of Bholua, their acclaimed leader, and shouted: "Ek ho, Ek ho(unite, unite)."

"Bholua, O Bholua," shouted Rampreet, who had the 'privilege of being in the vanguard of the procession because of his age. The door of the hut opened partially and a head popped out. "Bholua is not at home," the inmate announced.

"Where's he gone? There's a hartal from today?" Rampreet asked.

"To Hazipur."

"Hazipur? What for?"

"There's a bigger hartal there."

"Bigger hartal? Bholua zindabad. Jai ho, Jai ho."

"Say hartal zindabad" said a voice.

"Say Naulakha murdabad (to hell with Naulakha)," Dukhan Pande prompted from behind. Shouting Naulakha Murdabad, the processionists proceeded towards Waini bazar where the leaders would address them.

"Ek ho, Ek ho" shouts reverberated in the morning sky. The ripples of Burhi Gandak seemed to catch up the tune as the oars of fishing boats struck the waters in a synchronised motion.

At Waini Bazar there was a bigger congregation. Hundreds of people had assembled at whose call nobody knew. But there they were—men, women and children—all denizens of the microcosm that Waini was. Waini in fact, was the heartland, and the other villages were only arteries. When Waini called, others could not stay behind. But what was that? On a pole a flag flew half-mast. It was the tricolor with charkha (spinning wheel) in the centre.

"Where are the Lal jhandas," enquired Rampreet from a Waini striker.

"Forget the Lal jhandas. Something serious has happened."

There was a raised platform on which sat Babu Ramanand Mishra, Babu Viswanath Prasad, Lal Shibnarain and surprisingly two ladies, Sumitra Devi and Shakuntala Devi. Waving to the public and requesting them to listen quietly, Babu Ramanand Mishra said in a voice choked with emotion:

"Brothers, our *kisans* are launching a strike from today, but our country has to launch a bigger strike from today. We have to struggle against the *zulum* (atrocities) of the Angrej Sarkar (British Government). You all will be overwhelmed with grief to know that three of our *naujawans* (young men), who were valiant fighters for the cause of freedom—Bhagat Singh, Sukhdeva and Raj Guru—were executed last night in Lahore Central Jail. There will hardly be any Indian, whether in this village or elsewhere, who will not

weep for the untimely end of these heroes of the motherland? Here is a paper, which has come from Patna, wherein it is stated: 'Bhagat Singh, Sukhdeva and Rajguru were executed at 7.30 P.M. today in Lahore Central Jail for the murder of Mr. A. Saunders in December 1928. The execution followed the rejection in Lahore High Court of a petition for a writ of *habeous corpus*. The City Magistrate and other political and police officials were present at the execution.'

Babu Ramanand Mishra also informed the gathering that the execution touched off angry protests throughout the country.

"Hai Hai" (what a pity) shouted the assembled men and women.

"Brothers," Ramanand Mishra said, "let's stand up in silence for two minutes and then you say with me: 'Bhagat Singh zindabad, Sukhdeva zindabad, Rajguru zindabad, Bharat Mata zindabad'. As if hypnotised the vast motley crowd of villagers stood up and repeated "Zindabad" as the name of each Sabeed (Martyr) was called out.

XII

AFTERMATH OF STRIKE

All was not well in the household. It was not difficult for Benu to gather from the sombre appearance of his Dada, as he returned from office in the afternoon, that something serious had happened. As usual Dada washed his hands and feet, changed clothes and reclined on the easy chair. Mejoma started fanning him while Benu's sister-in-law brought the repast. But Dada did not touch it. Evening time was his time with Babla. But today Dada did not call for Babla. The baby was crawling about in the rooms while Benu's sisters, Sita and Shobha, stood on guard. Throughout the evening Dada sat disconsolately. Nobody dared to ask a question or bring Babla to him.

"Mejoma," Benu heard his Dada say. "They've hanged Bhagat Singh, Sukhdeva and Rajguru. Three precious lives have been lost." Who they were Mejoma did not know. She was not expected to know. Her prime concern was to see that the servant and the cook reported in time, that they did their allotted work, that the food was ready in time, that there were enough provisions to last till the end of the month.

"We'll now have to do the household work ourselves. There's a total strike. Dwarka and Ramji won't come for duty," Dada said.

Mejoma's face fell. Absence of the servant meant that somebody would have to go to the main road, work the hand-pump and bring buckets of water to fill the *hauz* (cistern). "The girls would have to bring water," Mejoma said. "Myself and Bowma (daughter-in-law) would clean the utensils and sweep the floors and courtyard.

Benu heard every word of Mejoma sitting in the adjoining room with a pile of books. He shouted: "I'll bring the water from the hand-pump, Mejoma."

There was a flicker of smile in Dada's lips. He called Benu to his side and asked him to sit beside him.

"Do you know who was Bhagat Singh?" he asked.

Benu shrugged his shoulders. Dada told Benu how the British, the Gora Sahebs, had come to this land first as traders, and then gradually became conquerors; how the English General Robert Clive defeated Nawab Siraj-ud-daula, the last independent Nawab of Bengal at the Battle of Plassey, and then became rulers of this country.

They built a fort in the Maidan which came to be known as Garer Math. If Benu ever went to Calcutta with Mejoma and stayed in his maternal uncle's place at Kidderpore he could see the Maidan from the rooftop. Dada also told Benu how the great Indian, W.C. Bonarjee, became the first Indian President of the Indian National Congress in 1885, an organisation formed to fight for the independence of the country. W.C. Bonarjee, Benu heard his Dada say, was the nephew of Mr. Sambhu Chandra Banerjee, who was related to the family. Benu felt a sort of elation. Then Dada said that there were leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Motilal Nehru, C.R. Das, Lala Lajpat Rai, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Rajendra Prasad, Jawaharlal Nehru, Rajgopalachari and Subhas Chandra Bose and others who made tremendous sacrifices for the sake of Swaraj. "Do you know what's Swaraj?" Dada asked. Benu said he did not know the exact connotation but literally it meant "self-rule". "That's right," said Dada. "After the Sahebs leave our country, we'll be masters of ourselves. We'll choose our own leaders."

"But Bhagat Singh? Why was he hanged," Benu asked.

"There were sections of people who believed that the Sahebs would not leave this country unless they were compelled to do so. They were the revolutionaries who believed in armed struggle against the British *Sarkar*. Well, I don't say whether they were right or wrong. Perhaps only time could tell. But Gandhiji believed in non-violence. Now Bhagat Singh had hurled a bomb in Central Legislative Assembly in Delhi. He and his comrades were arrested for shooting down a Gora Saheb."

"Was this action right?" Benu asked.

"When you grow up Benu you'll read about the atrocities committed by Gora Sahebs on our defenceless people. At a place called Jallianwala Bagh in Punjab they had shot down more than one hundred unarmed Indians. Our leaders were beaten and sent to jails. Why? Because they wanted Swaraj. Our people look upon Bhagat Singh and his two associates - Sukhdeva and Rajguru - as martyrs. Today they're mourning their execution by alien rulers. In the school you're taught to sing 'God Save the King'. That's not our National Anthem. Our National Anthem is *Bande Matram*, a song composed by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. It is this song which was sung by the martyrs at the time of their execution. When you grow up Benu, you may see the Assembly Chamber where Bhagat Singh had hurled his bomb."

Evening had crept unnoticed. A pall of darkness gathered around the banana grove in the backyard. Mejoma locked the courtyard door, placed

an earthen lamp before the *tulsi* tree, lighted the kerosene lamps and then blew the conch shell in the meditation room.

"Benu," Dada said. "When you grow up you may serve under a free and independent India. but in whatever capacity you're you must serve with dignity and self-respect."

Director McBride of the Institute sent for Burra Babu to his chamber as reports poured in about the strike launched by the farm-hands, the domestic servants including cooks and butlers. Reports had also reached him about the closure of the Waini Bazar and the weekly *pethia*. There was no traffic on the main road leading to the Station. Not a tum-tum plied. But more serious was the slogan "Inquilab Zindabad", which the illiterate and half-clad villagers—as the Sahebs thought them to be—raised at the meeting in Waini Bazar, near the Naulakha gate.

"Look Burra Babu," Director McBride said as Pinaki Babu had made a low bow, "get in touch with the Commissioner, Tirhut Division and apprise him of the situation here. I would like that a company of the Bihar Light Infantry is sent here from Muzaffarpur. They should encamp here for a week during which period, I hope, the situation would get diffused. Understand."

"Yes, Sir. Very well sir," Bura Babu responded with alacrity.

Birjoo Babu, the moustached Estate Manager, was hastily summoned by the Burra Babu and ordered to make arrangements for the pitching of five hundred tents on the polo ground. "Everything on a war footing. Do you understand?" Burra Babu extended his eye balls as he ejaculated those words. "Yes, Sir, very good Sir," murmured Birjoo Babu while disappearing from the scene as fast as his legs could carry. Now he must get hold of his Assistant, Akhileswar. That fellow was in the habit of giving him the slip in moments of crisis. When Birjoo Babu sent for Akhileswar he was informed by his orderly that the Chhotey (the assistant) manager had gone on a round in his bike. "Damn that truant," Birjoo Babu uttered a muffled curse. Failing to contact his Assistant Birjoo Babu sent for Thikedar Ramautar, who was totally unprepared for the Estate Manager's fulminations. "Look here Ramautar," said Birjoo Babu twirling his moustache, "you're the Thikedar for the Naulakha insofar as labour recruitment is concerned; you're under a contract for the smooth and regular supply of the labour force. Burra Saheb desires that the workers must report for duty, strike or no strike."

"The situation is rather complicated," Ramautar said.

"That's not my look-out. You tackle the situation as best as you can. Or else...", Birjoo Babu looked at the despondent figure who didn't look to be his original self.

"Huzoor," Ramautar folded his hands.

"Or else you'll lose the contract," Birjoo Babu modified his admonition out of sheer pity for the Thikedar who now bent low and almost touched his feet."

The following day news spread like a wild fire in Mahmuda village that Fakru Mian and Sundar Pasi had been arrested. The charge against Fakru Mian was that he was illegally felling trees in Bairia Dhaf. Sundar Pasi was caught red-handed while he was tapping a palm tree for extraction of juice. The Mahmuda villagers were further astounded to know that Thikedar Ramautar was behind these arrests.

Things moved rather fast in Bhuskaul and Mahmuda. There was a tap at the door of Babu Viswanath Prasad close to midnight. When Shakuntala responded to the call she was made aware of a warrant for the arrest of her father. A numbness seized her but noticing the stoic and composed face of her father Shakuntala did not falter. Babu Viswanath Prasad advised Shakuntala to send Sukhdev, the domestic hand, to Kampta at Muzaffarpur with instructions to contact his brother-in-law, Chandrika Prasad. Bidding farewell to his daughter, Viswanath Babu moved out in the darkness of the night in the company of the custodians of law and order.

Babu Ramanand Mishra was awakened by loud thumpings on the door at the dead of night.

"Who's there?" Ramanand asked, surprised at the noise at that uncanny hour.

"The police," said a voice in the verandah.

Sumitra got up with a start. Sujata clung to her and began to cry. That the police had come to arrest her husband was clear to Sumitra when she heard the unusual thud at the door. But what was most astonishing was the suddenness of the action and the timing which was patently queer and inexplicable. She had no courage to ask any question. She knew that her husband also would not brook any question at this hour. Her husband had not done anything wrong. Protest at a rally against the inhuman treatment

of the British *sarkar* was no crime. Thousands had courted arrest and many more thousands would go to jail. The martyrdom of Bhagat Singh, Sukhdeva and Rajguru had inflamed many a heart and many more hearts heaved in pain away from public gaze.

Instructing Sumitra to send Ramjiwan to Muzaffarpur to contact his lawyer friend, Rambilas Banerjee, Ramanand took leave of his wife, kissed his daughter and comforted her saying: "I'll be back soon, dear. Don't cry." The heavy boots of the policemen faded on the gravel outside as the party trooped out in the darkness of the night with Babu Ramanand Mishra.

A heavy responsibility now devolved upon Sumitra Devi.

XIII

MANOEUVRES OF THE THIKEDAR

Thikedar Ramautar was at a fix. He had been warned by the *mooch-walla* (moustached) Birjoo Babu that his contract with the Naulakha would be terminated if he failed to bring the farm hands back to work. Breaking the strike—which had entered its ninth day—was no easy task. What could he do when the arrest of the two leaders—Viswanath Prasad and Ramanand Mishra—failed to break the morale of the strikers? They seemed determined for a long-drawn fight. The man behind the operation, the blackguard Bholua, had vanished from the scene. If he could be nabbed, the strike perhaps would fizzle out. But as yet the prospects looked bleak.

While walking out of Birjoo's office the Thikedar came face to face with Banwari, the loquacious Babu, who regularly visited Dudhia's toddy shop. They knew each other very well being birds of the same feather. The only difference was that Ramautar was a man of affluence and influence while Banwari was a petty clerk in the Naulakha devoid of any power or pelf.

"What's the matter Thikedar Saheb? You look worried." Banwari accosted Ramautar.

"*Areh Bhai, kya kahe, Birjoo Babu ne naak me dam kar diya* (what to do brother, Birjoo Babu has put me in a tight corner)."

"Why? Why? What's the matter?" Banwari itched for more information. Ramautar, unmindful of his status in the presence of Naulakha Babu, narrated the sequence of events culminating in the arrest of Babu Viswanath Prasad and Ramanand Mishra.

"There's no sign of the strike petering out and in the meantime the Estate Manager Birjoo Babu, has threatened me with the termination of the contract for the supply of labour for Naulakha," Ramautar said sadly and hoped for a sympathetic response from Banwari.

"That's all?," Banwari held Ramautar by the *hād* and took him to a spot where Birjoo Babu could not see them from his window.

"Look, I've a solution. You've to circumvent Birjoo Babu and tackle the Burra Babu," Banwari suggested.

"But how?"

"By going to the Assistant Estate Manager, Akhileswar Babu. He's the man who has influence over the Burra Babu and, as you know, Akhileswar is not enamoured of Birjoo Babu. He's waiting for the day when Birjoo Babu retires in six month's time. Then he would be the *de facto* Estate Manager."

"But why should Akhileswar go out of his way to help me?." Ramautar asked in despair.

Banwari winked, a sort of movement of eyes which indicated how things should be got done. Ramautar failed to grasp the hint.

"Give a bait and the fish will catch it." Banwari gave a hearty laugh as he pulled his bike, mounted it and made off for the Babu quarters.

Leaving Banwari, Ramautar proceeded to Dudhia's hut in the bazar, but there was no trace of her there. Two or three customers came for their drinks but they too were disappointed. One of them said that Dudhia was distraught, and flung abuses saying: "My father's in jail and you fellows have come here for a *mouj* (enjoyment)". "She's saying *ant sant* (irrelevant words)," said a second man. "She must have gone to make *pairavi* (influencing) to get her father's release," said a third one.

Ramautar did not tarry. He turned towards his residence in Waini bazar. He must give thought to what Banwari had said.

A quick-witted woman like Dudhia knew too well the hazards that confronted her following the arrest of her father, Sundar Pasi. She discounted the rumours that Ramautar was instrumental in locking up his father in the *hazat* (lock-up). Why should he behave so irrationally? Ramautar, as far as she guessed, was fond of her; in fact he doted on her. Would he spurn her love and give pain to her by getting her father arrested? No, it could not be. It must be that crafty Assistant Estate Manager, Akhileswar, who had once made advances to her when she had gone to his Naulakha office to obtain a tapper's licence. The way Akhileswar had looked at her then and surveyed the contours of her body by furtive glances was enough to convince her that Akhileswar had really meant business. No licence without a surrender, that was the hint that the swine of that Assistant Estate manager had dropped. Dudhia had flung her papers at his face and walked out with a threat of reporting the whole matter to Birjoo Babu. That same Akhileswar now got his revenge by arresting her father. Very soon he would crack down on her clandestine den and send her also to the police lock-up. The situation was getting more complicated. She must meet Ramautar and tell him all about it.

Under cover of darkness Dudhia moved swiftly and entered the compound of Ramautar's Waini house. There was none in sight. Dudhia tapped at the door softly-once, twice, thrice. Ramautar was inside the house and relaxing after a fruitless journey to Dudhia's den. Thinking that a sip or two of the *vilayati* (foreign) drink would do him good, he had just uncorked his whisky bottle when three successive taps on his door made him stand up. Opening the door he was surprised to see a veiled feminine figure. Not until Dudhia removed her veil could Ramautar recognise her.

"You Dudhia, here and at this time?". Ramautar expressed his surprise.

"What else to do? They've locked up my father in the *hazat*." Dudhia looked up to see for any sign of emotion in Ramautar's face. There was not any.

"I've been telling everybody that the Naulakhs Burra Saheb had issued strict orders to apprehend all poachers, fellers and tappers in Bairia Dhaf. Perhaps Birjoo Babu is behind the arrest of your father," Ramautar said.

"Not Birjoo Babu, but his Assistant. I hate to utter his name."

"You mean Akhileswar?" Ramautar looked at Dudhia in surprise.

"Yes. I've my hunch. But if you love me, as you've been saying so often, you must get my father released." Dudhia pleaded. She did not mention about her earlier encounter with Akhileswar.

Ramautar pondered. Akhileswar wanted a *bakshis* (reward) as that Banwari fellow had told him. What better bait could there be than Dudhia herself? But he would not act in haste. He must try with cheaper baits first. The liquor in the glass shone with unusual brilliance. Ramautar made Dudhia sit by her side, and holding his glass upto her lips said jocularly: "I know you won't touch it, although you have no compunction to sell it. Now come on Dudhia. Let's strike a deal. I'll secure the release of your father, but you'll have to help me out of this strike impasse."

"But how?" Dudhia looked at Ramautar in surprise.

"I'll tell you. You've your father's house in Chippiatoli. You've considerable influence in your *baradari* (community). You go there and tell your folks that this strike is not in their interest. The upper castes want to reap all the benefits at the cost of the *achchuts*. Can they afford a long-drawn out strike and suffer trials and tribulations? Who's gaining? It's

that Sahukar Chchoteylal. He gives loans at exorbitant rates of interest—loans which the Harijans can't repay with their meagre earnings."

Dudhia sat glumly. She pondered over the matter. Here was Ramautar before him. He wanted to create a rift between the high castes and the low castes. He wanted the strike to end in failure. He would get much ecomiums from the Naulakha, and perhaps more lucrative contracts. But what would happen to her? Would Ramautar keep his word? Would he make her his wedded wife? Would he make her the owner of one of his *kothis* (houses) as he had often professed to make?

"And what would be my remuneration?" Dudhia boldly asked. "Your remuneration?" Ramautar was taken aback at the suddenness of the question. He looked straight into Dudhia's face and then burst into a laughter.

"Your remuneration Dudhia," he said, "will be my undying love for you." The next moment Dudhia found herself firmly in Ramautar's warm embrace.

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Akhileswar Babu was a practical man. He knew how to fool his boss by making a pretence of doing hard and dedicated work. He was always on the move, visiting the reserved forest on his bike and catching unauthorised intruders into the Bairia Dhaf and extracting hush money from them. "Either pay or go to *haza!*", that was the threat be held out to all unlicensed tappers and fellers of trees. One such intruder, who was nabbed by Akhileswar, was Sundar Pasi. He had just climbed the palm tree to bring down his *katiya* (earthen jug) when Akhileswar appeared on the scene. "Come down, you thief," Akhileswar roared. Poor Sundar slid down the palm tree in great trepidation.

"Huzoor." He folded his hands and uttered, "I'm a poor man. I've no money with me."

"You bloody rascal. You're the father of that bitch Dudhia. Isn't it? I'll teach her a lesson. Now give me your *zurmana* (fine) or go to hell. But look; I want money by this evening." Akhileswar growled like a leopard sitting over the back of the overpowered prey.

Once back to Waini, Sunder Pasi forgot all about the encounter. By evening he was firmly entrenched in *bhati-khana* (wine shop) unmindful of Akhileswar's threat. But who could know that the blustering Assistant

Estate Manager meant business? Once out of the *bhati-khana*, he was shouldered by a constable and locked up in the *hazat*.

Fakru Mian was caught by Akhileswar while felling a withered *babul* (acacia) tree for fuel wood. Little did he suspect that the *chota* (junior) Manager could be on the round. His axe rolled down from his grip as soon as the devil of the manager caught him red-handed.

"Now Fakru. You should take the *hawa* (air) of the jail," Akhileswar grinned furiously.

"Huzoor, you're my Ma Baap (father and mother)," Fakru implored.

"Have you any money?"

"No Huzoor. Not a *kouri* (a dime)".

"Then go to *hazat*," Akhileswar cut him short. There was no escaping the wrath of the Assistant Estate Manager. By evening Fakru was also lodged in Waini *hazat*.

The very next morning Thikedar Ramautar was at the door of the Assistant Estate Manager, Akhileswar. He carried a small handbag from which protruded the neck of a glistening bottle. He tapped at the door and as Akhileswar opened it, Ramautar smiled broadly with the customary *namaste* (salutation).

"What's matter, Thikedar Sahab?" he asked, "Up in the morning so early."

"I was passing this way. I thought I might pay my respects."

People say you're going to take over as Estate Manager very soon", Ramautar feigned a smile.

"No, no. That's not correct. I've to wait for six months more. Now tell me how goes your business."

"Business is rather dull. This strike has crippled me, of course temporarily. I thought you might help."

"I?" Akhileswar expressed surprise. "How can I help?"

"No. Not monetarily. Only by your blessings." The Thikedar mumbled the words as he took out a bottle of whiskey from his bag.

"I had been to Muzaffarpur and I brought this bottle for you. This is *khas vilayati* (real foreign stuff)."

Akhileswar's eyes beamed. "O, what's the necessity? Why should you have taken the trouble of ..."

"No trouble. It's a pleasure." Ramautar did not allow him to complete the sentence. "Now a small request, Sir. There are two chaps—Fakru Mian and Sundar Pasi who were locked up in the *hazat* yesterday. I thought you might condone their indiscretion and let them out."

"Let them out? Those two rascals? They should be sent to jail." Akhileswar frowned.

Ramautar was not to be daunted by Akhileswar's outburst. He remembered Banwari's advice "Give him a bait and he will accept it. He put his hand in his *kurta* pocket and took out a large-sized envelope. Presenting it to Akhileswar he said: "The wives of those rascals gave me this - a penalty for their husbands' guilt. You may please have a look yourself." Akhileswar gave a quick look into the contents of the envelope. There arose a faint smile in the corners of his mouth.

"That's right. They should have paid the fine on the spot. After all it's Government money. Now since they have suffered already I'll order their release forthwith," Akhileswar said keeping the envelope in his drawers.

XIV

EVENTS AT MUZAFFARPUR

Sumitra despatched Ramjiwan to Muzaffarpur before dawn with a letter addressed to Rambilas Banerjee, a leading Advocate of Muzaffarpur. She had written:

"Brother, the strong arm of the alien ruler has grabbed my husband and your friend, Babu Ramanand Mishra. His fault? A speech in the protest rally to condemn the execution of the heroic sons of the soil, now martyrs—Bhagat Singh, Sukhdeva and Rajguru. He's been taken to the Muzaffarpur jail. Please do all you can to help him." When Rambilas got Sumitra Devi's letter he was visibly moved. Memories of yester-years came surging in his mind. Ramanand and Rambilas were like two brothers sharing the same room in the college hostel and studying in the same class. Both were stirred by the spirit of the times. The writings of Tilak, Gokhale, Lala Lajpat Rai, Ramanand Chattopadhyay, and the speeches of Motilal Nehru, C.R. Das, Surendra Nath Banerjee, and many others inspired them. And Gandhiji? If there ever trod a person with roots deep in the virgin soil of Mother India it was Gandhiji. Whenever he spoke about the need to break the shackles of poverty, superstition and illiteracy with a view to achieving Swaraj, Ramanand remembered the soul-stirring call of Vivekananda:

"Go and preach to all: Arise, awake, sleep no more; within each of you, there is the power to remove all wants and all miseries. Believe this, and that power will be manifested... If you can think that infinite power, infinite knowledge, and indomitable energy lie within you, and if you can bring out that power, you also can become like me."

Gandhiji's call for non-cooperation with the Raj had a profound impact on Ramanand. He once had confided to Bilas:

"Bilas, you'll be an advocate. You'll plead the cause of your clients - may be in a District Court or the High Court or the Federal Court. You may appear in Privy Council also, of-course if you choose to become a Barrister. But I won't be accountable to any of these man-made institutions."

Bilas had laughed and then asked: "To whom then?" "To my people," pat had come the reply of Ramanand. "I'm a zemindar by accident. I inherited the zemindari. But one shouldn't forget that it was that Permanent Settlement of Lord Cornwallis which created a class of people called zemindars - a social elite which disdained the masses and honob-

bed with the Sahebs. Why? To get those idiotic appendages of Rai Sahebs or Khan Sahebs, or the more coveted O.B.Es or K.C.S.I.s. Isn't it foolish? How is their stature enhanced by such exotic decorations? What does a title mean to an ignorant villager who doesn't have even two square meals a day? And yet those power-crazy tribes of parasites sit on their breasts like an incubus."

Bilas had taunted him. "But dear friend, aren't you a zemindar? To whom does your land belong?" "To my people," Ramanand had replied. "I'm only a trustee." "I wish you could be true to your words," Rambilas had embraced Ramanand with affection. The two friends had promised to keep in touch with each other, even after the completion of their studies, and while engaged in their own chosen vocations. While Ramanand Mishra left the portals of the university even before graduation, Rambilas took his degree in law and set up his practice in Muzaffarpur Town.

"So Ramanand is as good as his promise," Ramabilas said to himself as he placed Sumitra's letter in his pocket.

It didn't require much effort on the part of Rambilas to secure his friend's release on bail when the court assembled at eleven in the morning.

Babu Chandrika Prasad was a well-known affluent zemindar of Muzaffarpur. His landed property lay in Hazipur and the adjoining areas of Sarai, Bhagwanpur and Garoul. To effectively look after his business interest he had built a mansion in Muzaffarpur's Bela Road. Babu Viswanath Prasad of Bhuskaul was his brother-in-law, being the husband of his wife's deceased sister. Kampta, Viswanath Babu's son, had been helped by Chandrika Prasad in running a hard-ware shop in Kalyani Bazaar. Times were rather bad. The nationalist press were scathing in their criticism not only of the Sahebs but also of the zemindars, who revolved as satellites around larger luminaries—the Britishers. "Make hay while the sun shines", that could aptly be summed up as the thinking of the elite which included the landed gentry as well as the top brass of the Indo-British administration. To talk like an Englishman, to eat and drink like an Englishman and to throw parties to entertain the white-coloured Sahebs, became a passion or rather an obsession with the Indian Princes. While the Rajas and Nawabs set the tune, the zemindars followed suit on a lesser scale. Little did they realise—of course Rudyard Kipling was a much ignored writer in the study circles of the Indian potentates—that the "East is East and the West is West and the Twain shall never meet." The barriers of colour were impenetrable. The white-skinned British

Burra Sahebs mixed with the coloured people purely on political and economic considerations. They shook hands in public but inwardly despised the impossible natives. There were, however, more humane Britishers, A.O. Hume among them, who loved India and who gave their best for the welfare of the country and its people.

While Chandrika Prasad prided on the fact that he was close to the Commissioner, Tirhut Division, his wife Sushila jokingly remarked that he was no better than a *chamcha* (sycophant). In fact she termed all those Babus who moved round and round the British Burra Sahebs, as *Angrej ke chamches* (sycophants of the British). Chandrika Prasad was, of course, too genial a person to take umbrage at his wife's remarks. Rather he appreciated her ready wit and her apt use of the similes and metaphors. But he disagreed with his wife on one material point. That was concerning Shakuntala, daughter of Babu Viswanath Prasad, his brother-in-law. She was so unlike her brother Kampta. While Sushila thought that Shakuntala would, in course of time, readily agree to marry a groom selected by them and approved by her father, Chandrika Prasad thought otherwise. There was a fire in her eyes. She seemed to be influenced by a revolutionary zeal for the liberation of the motherland, a tendency which could hardly be tolerated in the social milieu in which Chandrika Prasad moved. One day Chandrika Prasad had broached the subject before Babu Viswanath Prasad. "Why don't you fix up Shakuntala's marriage? There are eligible grooms around," Chandrika Prasad had asked. To this Babu Viswanath Prasad had replied: "Brother, time is changing. What was true fifty years back won't hold true now. Perhaps fifty years hence women wouldn't like to be hustled. Men may become more exacting and women more intractable. A woman like Shakuntala would be more discerning, more individualistic. You must have noticed that after her graduation a change has come over her. She's a mature woman now. She would marry when she liked and whomsoever she pleases. But as a father I've to see that she selects a proper groom. In this regard I think I can trust her." Chandrika Prasad had laughed at the idea. "It's the duty of the parents to give away their daughters in marriage and sooner the better", he had said. "Well, I trust you won't force your son, Rahul, to marry a girl of your choice," Vishwanath Prasad had subtly rebutted Chandrika Prasad's advice.

Rahul, the only son of Sushila and Chandrika Prasad, was a student at the Patna Science College. Already he had sent feelers to his parents that they should not worry much about his marriage. "Who knows where I'll be after graduation. I might go to Oxford or Cambridge," Rahul had written to his father already.

Early in the morning Kampta broke into Chandrika Babu's house with the news about the arrest of his father at Bhuskaul. "He's been brought to Muzaffarpur jail", Kampta told his aunt Sushila.

"I know this would happen one day *desh seva* (service to the land)! Why couldn't he settle down at Muzaffarpur and lead a carefree life?" Chandrika Babu said derisively looking towards his wife.

What do you understand what is meant by *desh seva*? Isn't it better to share the joys and sorrows of the toiling villagers than to lick the boots of the British Burra Sahebs?" Sushila burst out. "Right or wrong that's not the question now. Get in touch with Advocate Gagan Babu and arrange for the release of my brother-in-law," Sushila commanded.

Chandrika Babu received a jolt which he had least expected. He forthwith got in touch with Gagan Babu. Next morning Babu Viswanath Prasad obtained his release on bail, thanks to Gagan Babu's advocacy. The truth of Chandrika Prasad's so-called intimacy with the Commissioner, Tirhut Division was not put to test. Before letting his brother-in-law go back to Bhuskaul Sushila cautioned him: Jijaji, (brother-in-law), beware of that man, Ramautar. I think he's the person who was instrumental in your arrest. He must have his own axe to grind."

Ramanand stayed at his friend's house for a day. Earlier he had sent a communication about his own release and that of Babu Viswanath Prasad to Sumitra through a nephew of Rambilas who was going to Waini from Muzaffarpur. Ramanand was glad to note that Bilas had prospered and established a lucrative practice. He maintained a horse-drawn coach and a syce (coachman) drove his vehicle.

Before retiring for the night Rambilas told Ramanand that he had a nephew in Naulakha. "Perhaps you don't know," Rambilas said, "my wife has a widowed sister, her husband Anadicharan having died when she was only fourteen. Anadicharan's elder brother, Devidas, was an employee in the Institute. He died at an early age of forty-four. Within two years of her husband's death Devidas's wife also died. Hers was a tragic death."

"Why? What happened?"

"One day she had climbed on a stool to fix up a portrait of her departed husband, when the stool slipped from under her feet. She fell down and complained of acute pain in her abdomen. The local doctor, realising the seriousness of the injury, suggested that a British surgeon be summoned from Muzaffarpur. The surgeon came and diagnosed it as a

case of acute peritonitis. There was no remedy. Sensing that her end was near, she sent for my sister-in-law, i.e. Anadicharan's widow from Calcutta and when she did come post-haste, Devidas's widow held her by the hand and said, 'Sister, I'm going. You look after my children and be a mother to them. Take care of Benu. He's very unfortunate.' Then she passed away. It was a deliverance from her acute intestinal pain. Since then my sister-in-law is the *de-facto* mother of the family," Rambilas said.

"Benu? You said Benu, Bilas? Isn't he that fair-skinned slim boy who was born posthumously and whose brother is Shibdas?"

"That's right."

"I know Benu and I've met him. He came to our house in Mahmuda. My daughter Sujata is very fond of him. She calls him Benu *bhaiya* (brother)."

"You're right. Belonging to a rich and respectable zemindar family, they've become wage-earners. Bereft of his wealth and property Devidas had to take up a Government job in the Naulakha. Who could think of it? And now his son, Shibdas, is the mainstay of the family. Well, Ramanand, if you happen to go to Naulakha, which is close to your village, do look up my nephew, Shibdas. His sister's marriage is to take place soon. I'll send some money which you please hand over to Shibdas."

"I will," said Ramanand.

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Shakuntala was a picture of sadness after that accursed night when the burly custodians of British law whisked away her father. If only they had arrested her instead of her father! How could her father stand the trials and tribulations? What should she, a woman, do to help her father? Kampta was of course at Muzaffarpur. He must be doing all that was possible to secure his father's release. But she herself was utterly useless. Shakuntala for the first time felt miserably helpless and lonely. If only at this critical moment of her life Sumant—her idol, her happiness and her dream—were present. But where was he? He might be ploughing the lonely furrows away from public gaze. Feeling desolate, Shakuntala asked the house-maid to be at home and send any message received from Muzaffarpur to Ramanand Mishra's house at Mahmuda. "I'll stay there till the evening," she said as she left.

Sumitra and Shakuntala found solace in each other's company. They talked about the perils that confronted them and to draw comfort recited

from the Ramayana. As yet there was no news. The Telegraph Office was in Waini and it always took quite sometime before any message could be delivered in Mahmuda. At about five in the afternoon there's was a tingle of a cycle bell just near the garden gate. Sumitra's heart thumped. Surely a messenger had come. Before she could hurry to the door, Sujata was on her legs and she darted towards the door.

"Benu *bhaiya*, Benu *bhaiya*," Sujata shouted as she saw Benu getting down from the bicycle driven by the domestic hand, Dwarka.

Indeed Benu was there on an important errand. When Sumitra saw Benu's flushed face, she was a trifle perplexed. The boy had come a long distance just to meet her.

"There's a letter for you, aunty," Benu said, "It's been brought from Muzaffarpur by my elder brother. Sumitra hurriedly took the letter. It was from her husband. She opened the envelope with a trembling hand. As soon as she finished reading she clasped Benu to her bosom and imprinted affectionate kisses on his soft rosy cheeks. "You're great, Benu, you're great indeed." Sujata clung to her mother and was obviously unhappy that Benu was monopolising all her mother's affection. Sumitra drew Sujata to her bosom, kissed her lovingly and said, "Darling, your Babuji is coming to-morrow." Shakuntala also instantly got the news of her father's release.

XV

BEYOND THE TEMPLE PRECINCTS

A Kali temple is said to be incomplete without a temple to Lord Shiva. Therefore, the residents of Dighra and adjoining villages had put in their might, raised resources, and built a temple to Lord Shiva within the precincts of the Kali temple. Men, women and children flocked to the Shiva temple every Monday in large numbers. Seasonal flowers like marigold, jasmine, *champa* could be seen in abundance as also leaves of *bel* which were offered to deity as part of the herbal offerings. Village women traded small packets of vermilion, dried coconuts, guavas, and bananas grown locally, as also banana leaves for carrying the offerings to the temple. Outside the temple sweet-sellers displayed a variety of sweets, and in the same row as the pedlars of sweets, sat the *bhajia-wallas*. A sweet delicious aroma wafted in the morning air as buyers congregated before the shops after offering prayers.

Bahu Dai was not a seller of *bhajia*. She was a specialist in the making of *dalpuris* (baked *chapatis* stuffed with ground pulses). She was a connoisseur in this art. She had a portable charcoal oven. Her strong muscular arms were constantly on the move. So dexterously did she wield the roller-pin that within minutes she could prepare four or five raw *dalpuris*, which she put on the oven and fried as the customers waited. She dished out her products on green banana leaves with mango-pickle, a combination which caused many a mouth to water. As her arms were at work, her ears were also alert. All sorts of village gossips entered here ear drums and she garnered them in the memory cells for activation later in the evening in the innermost recesses of the Bairia Dhaf, a hide-out for fire-brand revolutionaries. Bahu Dai was a contact woman. She would use her eyes and ears and report the goings-on of the outer world to her Babuas (children) of Bairia dhaf. A sleek fishing boat from an unfrequented bank of the Burhi Gandak would ferry her to her *dera* (residence) every evening and she would distribute the surplus *dalpuris* to her children as she fondly accosted the freedom-fighters. Bahu Dai was revered as *mataji* (mother) and like a mother she was solicitous of the welfare of her adopted children. Whenever she sensed danger or saw unusual police activities she reported the matter to her children. It was at one of her sittings outside the Shiva temple that Bahu Dai heard of the incident about Fulia, the young widowed daughter of Ramphal. Poverty compelled Fulia to go outside her hut in search of fuel wood. Little did she suspect that youth in a woman was like fuel to the fire. It whetted carnal desires in depraved men and inflamed their passions to such an extent that sense and sanity abandoned them completely. Men under the

influence of passion turned into hideous monsters. In one of her outings Fulia was gagged by two muscle-men, said to be henchmen of Ramdas, and brought to the garden house of zemindar Natwarlal. The Gora (white) Police Superintendent was the guest of honour at Natwarlal's guest-house that night. And Fulia was to be the choicest offering to the Saheb, besides redwine and delicacies of various sorts. Fulia's cries went unheeded, for the garden house was in a secluded locality and hidden from public view by tall spreading *amla* and *jamun* trees, besides sky-scraping eucalyptuses.

The story as heard by Bahu Dai might be coloured and exaggerated but the fact remained that Fulia was abducted and taken in tum-tum towards the Waini Station, by two sturdy paltanias. The paltanias who lived in Imlipatti, were mercenaries. Their forefathers were deserters from the army of Nawab Siraj-ud-daula after his defeat at the hands of Robert Clive. They fled the battle field and after crossing the Ganga came to dwell in an area contiguous to Dighra. Their military temperament persisted and off and on they engaged themselves in local conflicts and skirmishes, of course as mercenaries. After the British consolidated their say over the whole of Bengal, Bihar and Oudh, the paltanias, as these fighting men were called, took to fishing, hunting, bow-making, pig-rearing and a host of other agricultural and non-agricultural operations. They offered their services, i.e. their muscle and their brawn to zemindars on payment for settling the latter's personal problems, which of course meant extermination of known or unknown enemies. Many of the paltanias were on the pay-roll of big and petty zemindars and they did work, most of which were of hush-hush nature, at their behest. It was small wonder, therefore, that Fulia was abducted by two hefty paltanias, a fact corroborated by the shepherd boy, Lakhandas. But so great was the fear instilled in Lakhandas's young head by his relations that the whole incident was dismissed as a figment of imagination. Lakhandas did not speak out in public nor did the villagers. For who would dare to speak ill of zemindar Natwarlal? But the fact remained that Fulia never returned.

The fire-brand Babuas i.e. the revolutionary sons of Bahu Dai, to whom the incident was narrated, did not dismiss the incident as a figment of imagination. "Make a note Pinto," said Tapeswar addressing a young agile boy of eighteen, who was cleaning his gun. "Make inquiries who that Gora Saheb was. Action at appropriate time." Tapeswar and Pinto were assumed names. In the Bairia Dhaf rendezvous nobody was accosted by his real name. The inmates stocked ammunition which they ferried in the guise of ordinary *kisans*, practised shooting and wrestling. The body should be kept fit and trim, for, in a combat with Gora Sahebs a weak and infirm person was useless. Occasionally calls came from

distant quarters and Tapeswar despatched his trusted lieutenants in disguises with arms and ammunition. Sometimes it was towards Hazipur, sometimes towards Raxoul on the Nepal border and sometimes to Purnea on the Bengal border. They went as far as to Dumka dressed as farmers carrying a headload of revolver, the weapons which had to be passed on from hand to hand from secret caches.

Bahu Dai in one of her outings to the Kali temple heard news about the strike in Mahmuda, Waini and the neighbouring villages and the positioning of *Gora sipahis* (white-skinned soldiers) in Naulakha. This was a matter which she thought must be brought to the notice of her children in Bairia Dhaf.

Bahu Dai was about to close down her shop when a young girl, whom she had seen in the temple premises, hurried to her and asked for six freshly fried *dalpuris*. She looked worried, agitated and cast anxious glances behind her.

"What's the matter, *beti* (daughter). You look worried."

"Yes, I am," replied the girl. "I'm Ratna. My master wants me to bring *dalpuris*. Then he would ask me to bring liquor and serve it before the zemindar."

"Who's your master?"

"Ramdas, the temple administrator."

"Why're you afraid of him?"

"He's purchased me from my mother at Benaras, on the pretence of giving me a job in the temple. Now he wants to exploit me. I hear that he'll send me to the zemindar's garden house next Monday."

"Garden house? What if you don't go?"

"Then *goondas* (bad characters) would lift me and forcibly take me there. What shall I do? Oh God! Who can save me?" Ratna broke down.

"Don't cry my daughter." Bahudai comforted her. "You pray to goddess Kali Mata. If you take shelter unto her, she would surely protect you. It's the *brata* (duty) of the deity to protect and give encouragement to all those who come unto her shelter. Now tell me daughter, do you know Sumitra Devi of Mahmuda?"

"Sumitra Devi? No."

"She comes here every Monday in the morning. She wears a white silken sari with red borders. She's exquisitely beautiful. You can easily recognise her by the deep vermilion mark on her forehead. She's the wife of the zemindar of Mahmuda."

"I think I can recognise."

"Yes. When she comes here next Monday to offer prayers, you watch her. As soon as she finishes her worship, you fall at her feet and beg for shelter. I think she'll take you under her protection. She can forestal your removal to the zemindar's garden house in the evening."

"Thank you very much. May god bless you," said Ratna and collecting the *dalpuris* she ran up the steps towards the temple outhouse."

Zemindar Natwarlal was closeted with Ramdas. He had eyed Ratna through champagne eyes as Ramdas ordered her to prepare two more glasses of the inebriating drink.

"She's a nice thing, Ramdas," Zemindar Natwarlal commented after eyeing Ratna through the corners of his eyes, now blood-red. "Send her to my garden house at six in the evening next Monday. I'll invite the *Angrej* police suprinten (superintendent) to a dinner. Don't fail."

Ramdas smiled broadly. "Huzoor, I'm at your service. Last time this humble being got two hundred rupees from your honour. Ratna is younger, unmarried and more attractive than Fulia."

"H'm. I understand. Don't talk of Fulia. That bitch was unmanageable. Couldn't stand the attention bestowed upon her. Hanged herself. The clumsy idiot."

Natwarlal pondered for a while and then said: "All right, Ramdas. This time I'll give you five hundred rupees but mind you, no fuss. Nobody should be there except my butler."

"As your honour desires." Ramdas poured some more liquor in the glass and handed it over to Natwarlal. His face was lit with smiles. Standing outside the room Ratna heard the conversation and trembled from head to foot.

The week following the return of Ramanand from Muzaffarpur was spent in hectic activity. The striking majdoors in Mahmuda had to be encouraged. Those that required food had to be fed. Somehow their morale must be boosted if the strike was to be successful.

Ramanand's nephew Sudhakar, son of his deceased elder brother, came down to Mahmuda from Patna. It was a happy family gathering. Sujata was the happiest inmate in the household. She now got somebody who would tell her many interesting tales, take her to the river front for walks and gather the berries that grew in abundance in the village.

"Chachi (aunty)," Sudhakar told Sumitra, "it looks Sujata won't allow me to settle down in town and practise law. She wants me to remain in Mahmuda all the time."

"She's right. Why should you leave the village and migrate to town? There's no dearth of work here. Look at your uncle. He's busy from the break of dawn. He's to meet people and prepare schemes for their welfare."

"What sort of schemes?" Sudhakar asked.

"Schemes for reconstruction work. Setting up a community centre where women could be gainfully employed, establishment of creches for the children of working mothers, and an adult literacy centre. He's a more grandiose scheme in mind. He wants that a hospital should be built in Mahmuda. He's not expecting any government aid. Perhaps the Mission Headquarters may help."

"Wonderful! Such terrific schemes, and all to be handled by one person. Chachi, why don't you jump in the bandwagon."

"I'm already in it. Myself and Shakuntala are going from house to house to elicit support for the idea to set up an adult literacy centre. There's too much casteism in the village. The high castes won't allow the *achchuts* (untouchables) to come anywhere near them."

"That's the bane of our society," commented Sudhakar. I've heard Rajendra Babu speaking publicly against the social ostracism of the Harijans. Even Gandhiji said the other day that the country will remain in perennial bondage if one-sixth of our people are treated as untouchables. But tell me? Chachi, who's this Shakuntala that you mentioned."

"You haven't heard her name? She's the daughter of Babu Vishwanath Prasad of our neighbouring Bhuskaul village. She's a brilliant scholar. She topped in the Intermediate Arts and also graduated with Honours in Literature."

"A topper! And she's in the village! What work is she doing here?"

"Her father is old and infirm. She desires to stay in the village and look after him. Both the father and the daughter are nationalists. to the

core. They're enthused with a passion to help the people, to educate them and to inculcate in them a desire for a social change and spirit of independence. You must have heard about the strike by the Naulakha majdoors."

"Yes, I've" Sudhakar said. "Everyday here is a new experience. Well, I think I should go round with *Chachaji* (uncle) and see things for myself."

"That's good. Before that I should like you to accompany me to the Kali Mata temple tomorrow morning," Sumitra said.

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New Moon day. The Kali temple had a busy programme for the whole day. Devotees flocked to the temple since early morning and offered votive gifts of flowers, fruits and sweets to the goddess. Men and women from neighbouring villages came on foot and in bullock-carts. The premises resounded with the blowing of conches and the ringing of bells.

Sumitra Devi wanted to offer a special offering to the deity for the welfare of her husband. It was the infinite grace of the deity that her husband could come back, albeit on bail, from the much-dreaded prison-houses which the *angrej sarkar* had set up in different district towns. Dressed in a white silken sari with a deep vermilion mark on her forehead, Sumitra Devi came to the temple in a palanquin borne by four bearers. Behind her walked Sudhakar. He too wanted to have a *darshan* (glimpse) of the deity.

At the far end of the temple quadrangle stood a slim, fair looking girl casting anxious glances at all the women-folk that thronged the temple in twos and threes. She was Ratna, the maid-servant, working for Ramdas. At that moment Ratna did not think of anything except that perfidious person who had made her life almost intolerable. The way he looked at her and cast oblique glances was enough to send shivers through her frame. No, Ratna was desperate. She must escape from the clutches of this lecherous man and save her honour. Already she had been warned that she must get ready for journeying to the zemindar's garden-house in the afternoon. She had heard the tales concerning Fulia, the young widow who never returned from that infernal garden house of Natwarlal. Bahu Dai had cautioned her. Her life was in danger. Only Sumitra Devi could protect her and no one else. But where was Sumitra Devi? Ratna looked intently at each feminine figure, young and old. None matched the description given by Bahu Dai. Suddenly there were shouts - "Jai Mataji, Jai Mataji." Ratna looked towards the entrance. Sure enough there

stepped on the temple stairs a woman of exquisite beauty, grace and loveliness. She was dressed, as Bahu Dai had told her, in her customary white silken sari with a deep vermilion mark on her forehead. She was a queen among women and those that knew her called her *mataji* (mother). In her dainty hand she carried a small basket which contained the offerings for the goddess. That lady was Sumitra Devi indeed.

"Sudhakar," Sumitra said to her attendant, "tell the priest that the offering is to be made in the name of your uncle." Sudhakar understood. Married women did not utter the husband's name. He went inside the temple and spoke to the priest. Then Sumitra went near the entrance to the *sanctum sanctorum* and sat outside. As per the prevailing custom none was allowed to go inside and touch the deity; that was only the privilege of the priest. Mantras were chanted by the priest who made offerings to the deity citing the names of the persons on whose behalf the offerings were sought to be made. For purpose of purification and bliss holy Ganga water was sprinkled on the congregation. "May the goddess protect all those who seek shelter into her," the priest said. Assembled men and women prostrated before the goddess amid shouts of "Jai Kali Mata, Jai Kali Mata."

"Jai Kali Mata". Ratna uttered the words almost involuntarily. She was in a sort of stupor. She watched the devotees bow and then troop out in a single file. Here was the lady who could, if she willed, give her shelter. But would she? Just as Sumitra stepped out from the temple and proceeded towards the palanquin, Ratna darted like a doe and fell at her feet. "Mother, save me, save me. You alone can save me. Please save my honour, my life, she cried."

"What's this? What's this?" Sumitra stepped back in surprise. She called Sudhakar and asked for help.

"No, mother, no." Ratna broke into sobs. "First take me unto your shelter, listen to my tale of woe, and then throw me out, if you will. But for God's sake, don't leave me to be devoured by vultures. I am not an *achchut*."

Sumitra gestured to Sudhakar and asked him to leave the girl alone with her.

What Ratna told Sumitra with tears rolling down her cheeks was enough to convince her about the seriousness of her plight. Here was a girl who could be any mother's delight and the light of any household, standing before her and soliciting her help and protection. Sumitra looked

towards the temple. A small flag fluttered on the dome. That was the abode of the goddess Kali, the destroyer of evil. And here was a destitute girl seeking shelter, a *Prapanna Pathik*, a traveller in search of shelter. What should she do? Sumitra closed her eyes and prayed within: "Mother, you give shelter to all those who seek your protection. You instil in them hope and fearlessness. Won't you help this poor and destitute girl?" Starting up as if from a trance Sumitra asked Ratna if she was prepared to travel with her to her Mahmuda village. "Mind you, you're coming voluntarily," Sumitra cautioned. Ratna nodded. "What is your age?" Sumitra asked. "I'm eighteen," Ratna said. "Then you are a major," Sumitra said. "None can compel you to stay if you don't want to. Let the will of the Mother be fulfilled."

Sumitra asked Sudhakar to call the palanquin bearers. She motioned to Ratna to take a seat inside. Then she sat opposite Ratna. The palanquin bearers lifted the load and moved on with the refrain of "Bolo Bom, Bolo Bom." A surprised Sudhakar followed in slow steps. The village was opening up slowly but surely.

XVI ON THE SWING OF JOYS AND SORROWS

That some matter of great importance was being discussed by his Dada with Mejoma and brother Khokun was apparent to Benu when he returned from Mahmuda after delivering the letter to Sujata's mother. Dada was telling: "We'll be still short of five thousand rupees. Where to get the money from I don't know. I've drawn the maximum amount permissible under the rules from my G.P. Fund Account."

"Why not take a loan from my sister at Muzaffarpur," Mejoma suggested.

"Your sister has already promised to give me a thousand rupees not as a loan but as gift. But when that money will come I don't know. After taking that promised amount in consideration, the deficit is five thousand rupees."

Benu heard his brother Khokun say: "Why not sell a part of Mithansarai property?"

"That's not our property. That's Mejoma's. Our zemindari vanished in our father's time. We're now wage-earners, servants of the Government. I hope when Benu grows up he'll help the family and regain some of the lost glory. Perhaps you don't know once we're big zemindars."

Khokun was not interested in the past history of the family. He was now a store-keeper in a Government office in Muzaffarpur. Savings he had none. Nor had Mona or Sine. But money had to be found for the marriage of sister Sita. A groom had already been found; they wanted cash dowry of three thousand rupees, besides ornaments.

Benu heard Mejoma's voice.: "The best course would be to arrange for Mona's marriage. Whatever dowry we get can be utilised for Sita's marriage. Don't touch the land. There's one more sister to marry off. Remember that."

So that was agreed upon. Mona was hastily summoned within the next few days and his consent to marriage obtained. There was no dearth of eligible brides. Within a period of two months Mona's marriage was celebrated. For the second time an atmosphere of gaiety prevailed in the household where Benu was the youngest member.

So this was the Ganga about which Benu had heard and read so much. It was that sacred stream that hurtled down to earth from the matted hair of Mahadeva at the behest of Bhagirath. This was the holy river on whose banks thronged millions for prayers and purification. "Matah Gange, Matah Gange" was the chant raised by the multitude of men and women, who stood in knee-deep waters, with eyes to sun, offering handful of water with prayers to the sun-god: "I bow to the sun, whose colour is like the *jaba* (*hibiscus rosa sinensis*), who is the son of Kashyap, who is immensely effulgent, who is the killer of the darkness and destroyer of all sins." To Benu's tender mind the Ganga was something vast and immeasurable. It was as limitless as the sky above. Why did the mass of people love to take a holy dip in the waters which looked so muddy and unclean? He had no answer to this question. All that he knew from his elders was that the Ganga cleansed the body and purified the soul.

The occasion for the visit to Benaras was the marriage of sister, Sita. Never before Benu had felt so much exhilaration as now. Wending through the lanes, hand in hand with Shobha, and visiting temples in the company of brother Mona, Benu realised the immensity of the city known from ancient times as Kashi. And Kashi without the Lord of the city, Baba Viswanath, is a non-entity. The bizarre serpentine lanes, the slippery pavements, the scent of flowers and joss sticks, the cacophony of myriad voices and above all the sonorous "Jai Baba Viswanath" as the bells tingled and the drums beat created an unfamiliar fairyland atmosphere which to Benu was utterly incomprehensible. Never before had he seen such a congregation of men and women, old and young, with prayers on their lips and votive gifts in hand, making a bee-line for the temple. Would the Lord of Kashi charm away the ills of life? Would He fulfill their heart's desires?

The venue for the marriage was a dharamsala (charitable guest-house) which had been hired for the purpose. Brisk preparations were being made. For three days Benu's brothers made the necessary purchases. The women-folk included, Mejoma, sister-in-law Suprova, sisters Sita and Shobha and Benu's maternal aunt and her daughter Reena, besides a few local acquaintances. Baby Babla was being tossed from lap to lap. Benu took Babla to the grilled windows on the first floor and showed the frisking monkeys as they hopped from roof to roof and made menacing postures. Babla clapped with joy and said, "They won't do anything. They're playing. Isn't it?"

Downstairs there were noises of another sort. A cry of pain reverberated through the hall followed by a mad rush of several feet. What happened? Reena was crying in pain. Boiling milk from a vessel had

accidently spilled on her right foot. While some shouted for oil and others called for some cream a kindly gentleman brushed aside the crowd, took Reena in his arms and carried her to the nearest doctor who did all the dressing that was necessary. "A bad omen. Something serious was going to happen," said one of the ladies. "May the marriage pass off smoothly", commented another.

One the day of marriage nobody had any respite. The marriage of a Hindu girl required resources in men and money. A good amount of money has to be given as dowry, which includes ornaments and cash. Meticulous preparations have to be made for the entertainment of bridegroom's friends and relations. Any lapse in this regard is frowned upon and cases of cancellation of marriage at the eleventh hour are not uncommon. Of all persons present, Benu's brother, Shibdas, was the most worried. Benu noticed that his Dada's fair handsome face had lost its freshness. He was moving everywhere, giving directions regarding decorations, lighting, seating arrangements, and above all the dinner to be served to the bride-groom's party. Having ensured that everything was in order Shibdas sat down to relax on a folding chair. Soft strains of *sehnai* (a musical instrument) drifted from the direction of the decorated gate. The assembled men and women said that the marriage was being celebrated with much gaiety and cheerfulness.

The *lagna* (appointed hour for marriage) was fast approaching. Some four hours remained for the marriage to be solemnised. Suddenly an emissary of the bridegroom's father made his appearance without any fanfare and sought an immediate audience with Shibdas. What the matter was nobody could guess. After a closed-door meeting Shibdas came out with blood-red eyes and a face contorted with indignation. He moved to inner appartments and said: "I won't sell my sister, come what may." After a pause Shibdas burst out: "The rascal! They say we haven't told them that Mejoma is not our real mother. She's only an aunt. They think we are liars! Rogues."

There was a hush among the gathering. When Mejoma heard as to what had transpired she ran up to Shibdas beating her breast. "O Shibu, don't let this marriage fall through. There must be a way out. I know you look upon me as your mother but the people would always look upon me as a governess. O my accursed self! What would happen to Sita? Poor child! Who would wed her?" Mejoma wailed ceaselessly.

In the midst of all this confusion Biru Babu, who had accompanied Shibdas to Benaras, appeared on the scene and took an immediate stock

of the situation. "Why you're all agitated over this trifling matter? Where's the emissary?" Biru Babu asked. The emissary of the bridegroom's party, who was waiting in the outer room, was summoned before Biru Babu. Evidently he had not had his full say. He wanted to say something more to Shibdas, who, however, had no patience to listen. "Well, Sir!", Biru Babu told the gentleman, "you're annoyed because my friend hadn't mentioned that his mother was dead and that the lady known as Mejoma was only an aunt. But how do you conclude that Shibdas lied. You never wanted to know the relationship. Well, even the omniscient darling child of Vasudeva, Krishna, did not tell Yashoda that she was not his real mother. She was only a foster-mother. Come, let's be frank. You've come on a mission. There's a price for everything. The priest can fix up everything for a price." The emissary opened up slowly but hopefully. Once false step was likely to upset all his plans.

"Well, Sir, We'll forget everything if you're pleased to give additional two thousand rupees as dowry."

"Two thousand rupees? No, never," Shibdas flared up. Biru Babu held him by the arm and took him aside.

"There's no time," Biru Babu murmured in his ears. "Family prestige is at stake."

"But the money?"

Baby Babla appeared on the scene holding the apron string of his mother. Suprova had heard everything. This was a time of crisis in the life of her husband. She could not remain a silent spectator when things were going out of hands. She must act and act at once. Hastily she unlaced her gold necklace and handed it to her husband. "Go, pawn it or sell it. Marriage must be celebrated."

There was another round of sobbing. But this time the tears were of joy.

Sita's marriage was celebrated within the stipulated *lagna*.

After the marriage was over and the bridegroom's party had left with the newly married bride, Shibdas took Mejoma and Benu to have a dip in the Ganga at Dasaswamedha Ghat. "Mejoma, you are great" Benu heard his Dada say. "You've done so much for our family that your debt can't be repaid."

"Who asks for repayment?", Mejoma answered back. "Well, you'll do me the greatest service if you consign my body to the flames on the bank

of the Ganga after my death." "Yes, Mejoma," said Shibdas, "you'll have Ganga as your final resting place." Benu stared at Mejoma and his Dada. He didn't know that for a Hindu cremation on the bank of the Ganga was a "consummation devoutly to be wished."

Back at home after the marriage, Benu observed that things in their household were in a bad shape. There were privations, and worse still, exhibitions of temper on Mejoma's part. What the matter was Benu could not fathom. But he guessed that it was something to do with money.

"Benu," said Mejoma, "go to Pancha Babu's house with this pot and ask for a little mustard oil. This will be returned tomorrow."

"No. I won't go," Benu flared up. "Everytime you send me to this or that Babu's house, sometimes for oil and sometimes for sugar. Sometimes they give and sometimes they don't give. No, I won't go. Ask Shobha."

Mejoma burst out. "You grandson of a zemindar! You think we have hoards of money to repay the debts incurred on account of Sita's marriage or we have enough money to feed and clothe all of you or pay your school fees? If you don't do as I tell you, you won't have your meals to-day."

Grandson of a zemindar indeed! Benu realised that he had no money even to purchase the much-needed reading or writing materials for school. How much did a drawing copy cost? Three annas. But Mejoma had rebuffed him when he had asked for this sum. "Get away, we've no money to pay for your copy. There's no money even to buy cereals."

On that day Benu walked away with a downcast face. The prospect of facing the Drawing Master, Azim Hussain, without the drawing copy filled him with consternation. Next day Benu went unwillingly to school. During the Drawing period he took a back seat and began to draw the prescribed sketches on a plain sheet of paper. But there was no escaping the eagle eyes of the Drawing teacher. He caught Benu with his pencil and paper and blared out: "What? Without a drawing copy yet?" Hastily he wrote something on a piece of paper, folded it and sent Benu with it to the Headmaster. The Headmaster read the slip of paper: "This boy doesn't bring his drawing copy in the class." Benu's face fell. The Headmaster thundered: "Open your palm." Meekly, obediently Benu stretched his right palm. Smack went the cane of the Head Master once, twice, thrice. Benu cried in pain. "I hope you won't forget again to bring your drawing copy in the class," the Head Master thundered.

Benu walked back to his class stifling his tears. Somewhere on the tree outside a bird sang continuously "Chokh Gelo, Chokh Gelo." Shobha had told him that that was a kind of bird which always cried when in pain. The words meant "lost my eyes". Benu felt like the "Chokh Gelo" bird that day in school.

One day the class teacher asked every boy, who has lost his father, to raise his hand. Without guessing the import of this strange command, Benu raised his hand along with another class-mate, Ramashrey. Benu did not fail to notice that many of his class mates were looking at them with a pitying, scornful glance. Without father! What a pity!

Two days later an announcement was made that Benu and Ramashrey had been granted full-free studentship because of their good performance at school and adverse family circumstances. This was in consonance with a Government directive circulated to all schools by the Director of Public Instruction. After school hours Benu hastened towards home in high spirits. No more begging of fees from Mejoma. No more sharp retorts. He would now read upto the matriculation class without paying any fees. It was no small relief. Benu considered it to be a blessing from his dear departed mother.

At home Mejoma was discussing with his brother, Shibdas, about the financial position of the household. Benu heard Mejoma say: "Shibram's grocery bill of fifty five rupees has to be paid. The Lala has given two reminders already. The milk bill comes to rupees twelve. Dwarka has to be paid rupees six. And Benu's school fee of rupees three and annas twelve must be paid otherwise his name will be struck off the rolls. Benu refuses to go to school without the fees."

Hardly had Mejoma finished when Benu walked into the room. "I've been granted full-free studentship, Mejoma," Benu said. "You needn't pay my fees anymore." Benu's Dada, Shibdas, who was reclining on an easy chair, called Benu to his side and placed his hand on his head. Benu's eyes were moist with tears.

XVII

A MIDNIGHT TRYST

Shakuntala was standing near the window looking at the speck of cloud that had gathered on the eastern sky. She was alone in the house, her father having gone to Muzaffarpur.

Outside the wind suddenly stopped blowing. A hush came over the sultry countryside. Not a branch moved. Then the clouds gathered quickly, ominously over the Burhi Gandak. A storm was in the offing. Shakuntala closed the doors and windows, lighted a well lamp and lay down on the couch. Unlike her father she went to bed rather late. A strong wind blew and shook the *jamun* trees outside. A regular Nor' Wester, which they called *aandhi*, had come unannounced. Flashes of lightning followed by thunder lit up the fragile structures outside. "God! What a night!" Shakuntala almost uttered involuntarily and got up with a start. She peered out into the enveloping darkness. Soon the rains came, slowly at first, but more steadily, more forcefully later. The pitter-patter of the rain drops were lapped up hungrily by the parched earth.

A storm was raging outside. A storm was also raging in Shakuntala's heart. How long? O, God! How long would she wait for him? In such a night as this, Shakuntala guessed, Sumant must be in some far-off place in the performance of his mission. And that mission was to propagate the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi to the rural illiterates. Shakuntala had faith in Sumant. He had promised to her that he would come at a time of his own choosing.

A sudden lightning lit up the contours of the crouching village. Shakuntala closed her eyes and prayed for the safety of the forlorn traveller. Traveller? No. A missionary. Shakuntala liked to see him in the mould of Swami Vivekananda, moving from place to place, and giving the stirring call "Awake, Arise. A nation in bondage could not afford to lie in slumber." Events of the past suddenly came to her mind like the flash of lightning.

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They had met some years back at a college function. An inter-college debate on a topical issue "Should India accept Dominion Status or not" was slated to take place before a full house. But the situation demanded that the speakers should be careful in the choice of their words. Any emotional outburst against the ruling Raj was sure to be construed as sedition. As a participant in debate, Shakuntala spoke without betraying any emotion. She marshalled her facts and figures to show that the *angrej*

sarkar (British government) had no doubt committed excesses on the people at large, but the people of Great Britain were, by and large, sympathetic towards Indians. They were all for the amelioration of the condition of the masses. It was the force of public opinion, expressed outside and inside the British Parliament, which prompted the Government of the day to bring in legislative measures, to associate the people of India with the governance of their own country. Reforms of 1896, the Minto-Morley Reforms of 1909 and the Montague - Chelmsford Reforms of 1919 were all pointers in the same direction. To begin with there was no harm in accepting a Dominion Status recognising the sovereignty of the British Crown but at the same time conducting the affairs of the State unfettered and without any let or hindrance. What was required was a trust between the ruler and the ruled.

The person who next took the floor was young and handsome. On his broad shoulders the clean-shaved face looked almost boyish. Obviously he was well-known among the student community for there was a prolonged applause as he took the rostrum. Shakuntala had heard his name. But she saw him today for the first time. The eyes of the youngman sparkled with an unusual brilliance; there was even a flicker of smile in the corners of his lips; the hairs were neatly parted and his outfit exuded both grace and charm. The debator was Sumant Varma.

Sumant spoke slowly, determinedly. Then the tempo of delivery was raised and words cascaded from his youthful mouth leaving the audience spell-bound. The words that he used delighted even the purists of the English language. Sumant had done his M.A. in English with a First Class and now he was doing his Law. Language and arguments were his natural forte. Freedom, Sumant was saying, was not a commodity to be traded or bartered. It was the inalienable right of every person under the sun to be a free citizen, the denizen of a free country. History had shown that whenever attempts were made to trample upon individual liberty, to muzzle the voice of the people, revolutions, mostly gory and violent, had taken place. Rousseau's prophetic words "Man was born free but is every where in chains" fired the imagination of the French revolutionaries. When the cup of misery of the Russian proletariat living under Czarist rule was full to the brim, the country threw up its own natural leader, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, who led the great Russian revolution against Czarist autocracy, against the decadent bourgeoisie. Thanks to the Bolsheviks and Lenin, the Russian revolution developed into a far greater revolution than the French revolution. Lenin did not compromise on principles. He did not say: "Give us freedom in dribbles". No. Freedom, Sumant said, was indivisible. It had to be complete. Purna Swaraj. Like Lenin's Russia the country must be rid of all feudal survivals, of all hangovers from the

bureaucratic and capitalist land-lord system which ate into the vitals of our society. Dominion Status? No. Freedom? Yes. "I don't say that we should import wholesale socialism of the Russian pattern," Sumant said. "But once freedom is secured we would temper our revolution with justice for the benefit of the common man. Liberty, equality and fraternity would be the corner-stone of our state." Prolonged cheers greeted the concluding remarks of Sumant.

Shakuntala marvelled at his oration. What energy! What feelings! What a rational mind! A sort of inexplicable emotion gripped her. She must meet him and talk to him. She had nothing to offer except her admiration. As Sumant was moving towards the exit gate, Shakuntala caught up with him and introduced herself. "I'm Shakuntala of Patna Women's College." Sumant was surprised. Shakuntala? The name seemed familiar. He hesitated for a trifling second, then said: "You're the one who topped in the University in Inter Arts." Isn't it "Yes," Shakuntala said coyly. "I'm appearing in B.A. Honours Final." "I'm glad to meet you," Sumant said. "Hope to meet you sometime."

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They did see each other. Sometimes they sat on the bank of the Ganga and watched the soft rise and fall of the waters. While watching the waves, they talked of more serious matters, matters concerning life and living. "Look Shakuntala," Sumant said, "this Ganga flows on eternally. Many millenniums since the creation of this planet have seen this river pulsate, vibrate and dance in her onward journey to the sea. To me the Ganga symbolises the eternal spirit or the *atman* (soul). The Ganga empties herself in the sea. The *atman* mingles with the *paramatma*. Therein lies bliss, absolute contentment. Losing oneself or one's identity in the infinite is the ultimate aim or *summum bonum* of existence.

Shakuntala was surprised to see Sumant philosophise. "Look, Sumant, life's for living. The bubbles rise on the bosom of the Ganga and vanish. But that moment when the bubble arises is all important. Life's like the bubble. How we live is more important than how long we live."

"Yes, you're right. Absolutely right," Sumant said. "What's life if it's not a continuous struggle from the cradle to the grave. But we've to decide the shape and form of that struggle. And what can be more meaningful than the struggle for the liberation of one's motherland?"

Sumant paused for a moment. Shakuntala glanced at him, threw a pebble in the water and said: "I didn't mean that way. Struggle for independence we must but does it mean that we should snap all family ties,

smother the feelings which the parents have for their children, the husband has for the wife, or ..."

"Or what?"

"Or a foolish woman has for the elusive man." Sumant laughed. Then he said, "No, Shakuntala, I don't say that. Love, affection, or piety are the attributes of a sentient being. You can't brush them aside. But in the scheme of things which we've chalked out, these feelings must, at least for the time being, be relegated to the background. My education, I mean in the wide spectrum of life, isn't complete yet."

Shakuntala sighed. She sensed that Sumant was trying to hide something. When the sun is under an eclipse, its effulgence can be seen in the periphery. While trying to suppress, Sumant was, in fact, giving out something. But what that something was Shakuntala could not fathom.

But they liked each other's company. After her examination was over, Shakuntala accompanied Sumant to Nalanda—the site of the ancient Budhistic university. Going through the dilapidated structure—the hall, the chambers, the worn-out slabs—the seat of ancient gurus—and the bare corridors without a roof thereon, Sumant could not help heaving a deep sigh. In a muffled voice, and obviously in utter disillusionment, he said, "Look, Shakuntala, this is the end of all good, all beautiful things of the world. The glory that was Nalanda has gone. So has gone the aura that surrounded the ancient Babylon, Nineveh and Acropolis. Once this place throbbed with the heartbeats of thousands. The halls echoed with the voices of a vibrant people. But the place is now a mute testimony to what it was centuries ago. When I visit Nalanda I am reminded of Emperor Asok."

"Why?" Shakuntala asked.

"Because it was the patronage of a King like Asoka which gave universality to a religion. A preacher comes and gives a message. In that way Jesus came, Muhammad came, Budha came and in our own time Guru Nanak came. But the message of the Saint or Guru has to be carried to the people, to be propagated far and wide, even transcending the frontiers of the land of birth of the Guru. This task is done by the trusted disciples. Jesus had his disciples who are now honoured as Saints. Go to Rome and you'll find the edifice which a reverential people has built to commemorate St. Peter, who was so close to Jesus. It has been beautifully told in the Gospel:

"Jesus and his disciples set out for the villages of Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked his disciples, 'who do men say I am?' They answered, 'some say John the Baptist, others Elizah, others one of the

prophets.' 'And you?' he asked, 'who do you say I am?' 'Peter replied, 'you are the Messiah?'

Budha no doubt had his disciples but there was no greater disciple than Asoka. Look at the greatness of the man. Lord of Magadh, conquerer of Kalinga, he subjugated the entire land and synthesised the disparate principalities into a nation. You can easily find the areas under the sway of Emperor Asoka in any book of history. But a sudden metamorphosis, a revolution took place in the mind of that man. He renounced the path of violence and became a devotee of Budha, and took upon himself the task of propagating his message in distant countries. Greatness lies in renunciation and not in acquisition. When will we have a leader like Asoka who could mould this vast country, a sub-continent, into a viable nation? When would there be a saintly leader like Asoka?"

"You don't advocate dictatorship?" queried Shakuntala after Sumant had completed his peroration.

"No, no," Sumant said. "Don't think I've waxed eloquent in favour of dictatorship. I believe in democracy, in the government of the masses. But the masses, the proletariat, must carefully choose or elect their leader. I believe in a strong centralised government with adequate autonomy for the units or provinces. But that stage is yet to come. Freedom first, and by non-violent means, as shown by Mahatma Gandhi. But this much I can say with a certain sense of conviction that a government without the consent of the people cannot last."

"The shadows are lengthening. Now let's return. Where shall we go next?" Shakuntala asked. "To Rajgir and by a train, next Sunday," Sumant replied.

No spot in Bihar is more hallowed than Rajgir. Set in the midst of wooded hills, this sleepy little village had the privilege of bearing the footprints of Budha, who after his enlightenment, set out to preach his gospel, his *dharma*, to his closest disciples. When they got down from the train at Rajgir, Sumant and Shakuntala were filled with a sort of exhilaration which they had never experienced before in the dusty streets of Patna. They traversed through rugged country-side dotted with hillocks of varying sizes. They washed their hands and feet in the hot spring, watched by curious eyes of travel-weary pilgrims.

"Look, Shakuntala," Sumant said, "the people here are unaccustomed to see young people like us washing only our hands and feet. A bath in the hot spring is said to be a panacea for all ills. At least that's the

popular belief. There're many such beliefs which die hard. Much as you try the tradition cannot be broken."

After a frugal meal in a way side *dhaba* (catering shop) they sat down on a boulder. "How peaceful is the land all around," Shakuntala said.

"Yes. But there's no peace outside the precincts of this forest. This place - so serene, so tranquil - was hallowed by the presence of Lord Budha. He preached his tenets of non-violence from this place. But go down the hills, you'll find that the message which Budha gave is lost, drowned in the horrendous cries of suffering souls."

"There's much violence everywhere," Shakuntala observed.

"Yes. That violence has to be met with non-violence. After more than two thousand years a new apostle of non-violence has taken birth in our country. Mahatma Gandhi. That's why I'm leaving my hearth and home to come a little nearer to that effulgent orb. Not only I. Millions of our countrymen are flocking to him, to hear him and to imbibe his message. Freedom isn't a thing which can be laid on a platter. Much sacrifices are necessary. But I assure you I won't tread the path of violence."

"Can't I work alongside you?" Shakuntala asked.

"I know you're always by my side." Sumant said. "Let me complete my mission. And when the time comes I'll be back at your side to serve my own people."

A new relationship had begun. The hills and dales of Rajgir with their shades of grey and green didn't look more beautiful than now, as they came down to the plains. The afternoon sun had bathed the entire countryside with a saffron hue when they boarded the train for return to Patna.

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The wind howled and the rains lashed against the trees, the walls and the windows. Not a soul was outside. Shakuntala sat alone on the couch watching nature's fury.

Suddenly she started up. She heard something. Yes, it was a foot-fall. She could hear a deep resonant foot-fall on the pathway leading to the house. Shakuntala moved to the window and peered out. A human figure wrapped in a black mackintosh and a rain-proof head gear was distinctly visible near the gate. The visitor was a man.

With a heart thumping with excitement Shakuntala opened the door to let the man in. There was no mistaking. She knew her man. "Sumant!,"

Shakuntala said in an undertone, her bodily frame shaking with uncontrollable emotion.

"Yes. I had promised to come. Didn't I? Where is uncle?"

"He's gone to Muzaffarpur?"

Shakuntala hesitated for a moment. Then she removed Sumant's raincoat and hood and kept them on a chair. She took out a clean towel and moved to wipe off the drops of water trickling down from his face.

"Don't worry. It'll dry up. I won't stay long. I was passing this way. Thought I might look you up and bid farewell."

"That's very nice of you. I thought of you but scarcely expected you at..."

"At this unearthly hour?" Sumant laughed. "What could I do? The rains came suddenly." A thunder in the sky drowned his voice. Shakuntala did not reply. She mopped the waters from Sumant's hairs, took out his boots and the wet socks. She lighted the stove and put a kettle on it.

"You've thinned much," she said, "and also grown taller."

"Really? I was expecting you to say 'you've become uglier with this unkempt beard of yours.' Sumant's face lit up with a smile and he took the chair to make himself comfortable.

"How far are you going and how long?" Shakuntala asked handing over a cup of tea to Sumant.

"For the present to Sabarmati Ashram. But for how long I don't know. My mission isn't over yet."

"But I'm scared to death. How long shall I wait? My days are endless, my nights are miserable." Shakuntala was on the verge of tears.

Sumant was moved. He touched her shoulders lightly and looked into her eyes wet with tears.

"Shakuntala don't make my mission more difficult. I love you with all the love I command. But for God's sake have a little more patience. Think of the martyrs for the cause of freedom. Also think of those who left their hearths and homes, their near and dear relations, to plunge into the national struggle for the liberation of the motherland. Their mothers, sisters and wives must have felt equally bad, as upset as you are now. Well, I can give you a piece of advice. Stay in this village and try to understand the problems of your people here. Study their lives and try to

raise them from the morass of ignorance and superstitions. Light the torch of learning. Don't you remember those words of Gurudeva Tagore: 'We have to give words to these muted tongues. We have to instil hope in these broken and weary hearts.' Well, I must make a move now."

Shakuntala wiped off tears from her eyes. She helped Sumant put on the rain-coat, socks and boots. She handed over the knapsack and as Sumant moved towards the door, she held him by the arm.

"Just a moment. You're my guru, my all-in-all. Let me bow down." Saying this Shakuntala bent low and touched his feet. After a warm embrace Sumant stepped out in the bleak and desolate night. Come wind or rains, lightning or thunder, he must go on, go on. The journey knew no end. Shakuntala stared at the disappearing figure. Then she flung herself on the bed and wept.

XVIII

MACHINATIONS OF THE THIKEDAR

Fakru Mia was visibly surprised when emerging out of the *hazat* he confronted the grinning Thikedar Saheb. What the hell did he mean? Was he up to some new frolic? Or like the proverbial cat was atoning for the sin of swallowing a hundred mice. The Thikedar's presence at the *hazat* gate was utterly mistyfyng.

A broad smile lighted the moustached face of Ramautar. "Well, Fakru," the Thikedar said without any preamble. "I've secured your release. Also the Sarkar have permitted the tapping of palm trees under a licence. Aren't you happy?"

"Huzur," Fakru said with folded hands, "you're my protector. May the Allah bless you."

"Look, Fakru", Ramautar looked serious as he addressed him. "The *baniyas* (traders) have struck work in Naulakha for the past nine days. But who's gaining? Not you. Nor your brethren in Chipiatoli. The *lalas* (businessmen) may live without doing any work. But what about you people? You'll die or go to jail. Go and tell your people to report for work tomorrow. The Gorment (Government) have enhanced the wages of the farm hands."

Fakru Mia gaped in wonder. Was it true? O Allah be praised for his mercy. Fakru made a reverential bow and then hastened towards the village. Ramautar looked at the receding figure of Fakru Mia and laughed a hearty laugh.

Sundar Pasi was released from the *hazat* without much fan-fare. No body came to receive him. He wondered at the sudden softness on the part of the *daroga* (constable) who let him out. "Sarkar ki Jai Ho" (Let the Government be victorious). Sundar Pasi repeated the words twice and then ran in the direction of Waini Bazar. He must give a surprise to his daughter, Dudhia.

Dudhia knew too well that Ramautar was a prosperous and affluent contractor with business interests in Waini and neighbouring districts. He was also a bachelor and that meant a good deal to her. She nursed the idea that Ramautar had succumbed to her charms and that he intended to marry her, irrespective of the caste barriers. "Love they say is blind," and Dudhia believed in that adage. Should Ramautar accept her as his wedded wife she would turn a new leaf in her life. No more brewing of *tari* and clandestine sale of liquor. Her father too, she thought, could give up

the tapping job and start some business of his own. She had a good reputation in her village. People admired her for her good looks, her graceful manners, and above all her intelligence. She would no doubt be hailed as the queen of Chipiatoli, the locality earmarked for the untouchables, if and when she married Ramautar. Dudhia cogitated in her mind the proposal made to her by Ramautar and finally decided to make an attempt to wean away the Harijans from the strike launched in conjunction with Muslims and caste Hindus.

Monday was the day of the *pethia* (bazar) in Waini. Under a giant banyan tree the village folk assembled from early morning. There were sellers of a variety of goods, displayed neatly on bamboo mats, and there were buyers who moved from stall to stall to make bargain purchases. Among the merchandise were articles of daily use like earthenwares, china cups, children's clothes, *gamchas* (towels), vests, coarse cotton saris, vegetables, fish and mutton, tobacco, betel - nuts, knives, scissors, and cooking appliances. The Harijans had a special enclosure and they mostly traded in vegetables and fish. The butchers, mostly Muslims, had their stalls in the spaces reserved for Harijans. Among these Harijan traders Dudhia moved with a grace and fluency which attracted everybody's notice.

"What a surprise Dudhia! You're in the *pethia* today," Bundu Majhi was all smiles as he spoke.

"Times are bad, *chacha* (uncle)," Dudhia said. "There'll be a meeting at sundown today at the village chaupal (meeting place). You must attend *chacha*. There'll also be a *bhoj* (feast) thereafter. Tell everybody to come."

Dudhia purchased five seers of *rahu* fish from Bundu. "A good *bahuni* (beginning)" Bundhu thought. He was all smiles and he thanked Dudhia for the purchase as also for the invitation. Then Dudhia went to the vegetable section, where the sellers were all women from Waini and neighbouring villages. They sat on small mats and sprinkled water on the vegetables displayed in front of them to keep off the dust as also to make them look good and fresh. Green vegetables did not get contaminated by touch and hence the caste Hindus did not hesitate to buy their requirements from Harijan vegetable sellers. Dudhia approached Suneria, the senior-most Harijan woman among the vegetable sellers and purchased ten seers of green vegetables, a gesture that was warmly appreciated by Suneria.

"What's the matter, Dudhia? Is there any feast?" she asked.

"Yes, Bhouji (sister-in-law). There'll be a meeting at chaupal followed by a feast. You'll have to attend Bhouji, and help me in cooking. I'm celebrating the release of my father from *hazat* (lock-up)"

"Certainly". Suneria was highly gratified by the invitation, and thanked Dudhia for the purchases made. Dudhia called a village urchin and asked him to carry the load to her house. Then Dudhia met Dukhan Ram, the *mukhia* (headman) of Chipiatoli.

"I need your help, *chacha*. I'm giving a feast this evening. You'll have to preside over the meeting at the chaupal. We'll discuss about the Naulakha strike."

Dukhan Ram was elated, It was a nice gesture on the part of Dudhia to ask him to preside over the meeting. He, like others of his *baradari* (community), had been feeling the pinch of the strike. For days they had not tasted a good meal, not to speak of a feast. He thanked Dudhia for her bold move.

Dudhia made a round of Chipiatoli and invited all able-bodied men and women to assemble at the chaupal and partake of a feast. The occasion? Safe return of her father from the police lock-up. The women - folk promised Dudhia to assist in the preparation of the *dawat*. Budh Ram, the grocer, was too happy to sell the *masala* (spices) required for preparing the *bhoj* (dinner).

Throughout the day preparation for the feast went on. The chaupal was swept clean with a broom-stick and a mattress was spread on the ground. Nearby under the mango trees temporary *chulhas* (oven) were lighted to cook the food. A pungent smell of onions and garlic filled the air. Said Bhairon Kumhar, "we didn't have a good meal since the strike began. Don't you think that the strike should be lifted?" The person addressed to was Motiram. He too like other villagers felt the pinch of the strike. "I agree, brother," he said, "but who's going to take the lead? Those *lalas* (business people) and *baniyas* (traders) have made our lives miserable. Look at the *sahukar* Choudhary. He's literally fleecing us. Our household effects have all been pawned to him. The vermin! He should be burnt alive."

In the evening there was an air of festivity around the chaupal. On a raised dias — a wooden cot covered with a white *chadar* (a bed-sheet)—sat the *mukhia*, Dukhan Ram. With his shock of white hair and flowing white beard he looked like a character from Mahabharata, a sort of Bhisma Pitamaha.

Bidding his audience to silence, he made a brief speech wherein he explained the purpose of the meeting. Dudhia, he said, was a good lady, warm-hearted and kind. The interest of the villagers was uppermost in her mind. She would address the gathering presently. A cry of "Jai ho" went up from the throats of those assembled.

Dudhia stood up, folded her hands, and said "namaste" to all. Then she began: "Brothers, we're passing through a turbulent time. Chipiatoli is a locality where the inhabitants have been dubbed as *achchuts* by the high caste. One third of the labour force of Naulakha comes from those so-called *achchuts* or our Muslim brethren. As you know there's a strike. We're coaxed by the high caste people to join them in a strike to press for higher wages. But can we afford to be on strike? Who're the people worse affected? We and not the Brahmins, Kayasthas or Rajputs. They're well off and they won't feel the pinch. But we do feel it. How long can we sustain and feed our children without the wherewithal to buy food? As matters stand, we're borrowing heavily from the *sahukar*, Choudhuri Chchoteylal."

Dudhia paused. She surveyed the gathering. Everybody felt the way she felt. There was appreciative nodding by the assembled crowd.

"I'm told," Dudhia continued, "that the Naulakha authorities have agreed to enhance our wages. We should, therefore, report for work tomorrow unilaterally. Let the *baniyas* think what they like. We don't go by their bidding. I hope you all agree."

"Yes, yes," shouted several people simultaneously.

"Those who don't agree may raise their hands." Dudhia raised her voice. Not one hand went up.

"Thank you very much," said Dudhia and stepped down from the dias. A great feast followed. Amid shouts of "Dudhia zindabad" the crowd trooped out from the meeting place.

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Evening in Naulakha. Shibdas was in the living room trying to teach the alphabets to Babla, when Benu reported that a visitor had come. Asking Benu to take charge of Babla, Shibdas opened the door to let the visitor in. The visitor was no other than Thikedar Ramautar.

Shibdas welcomed Ramautar and offered him a chair. "It's a great pleasure to see you at my house," Shibdas said. "What's the matter? Can I be of some help?"

Ramautar coughed. "O yes. You can surely help." Then he became serious. In a plaintive voice he mentioned to Shibdas about the prolonged strike in Naulakha, which had put his thikedari (contractor's business) in a jeopardy. "Shibdas Babu," Ramautar said, "the wages that the labourers get are insufficient. They can hardly sustain themselves. If the wages are enhanced, the strike will end tomorrow."

"But where do I come in?," Shibdas queried. "It's for the Burra Saheb to decide."

"That's right. But the Burra Saheb must have a proposal before him. Somebody has to put up a suggestion in writing. A note has to be prepared. Akhileswar Babu has already sent a proposal to you in writing. He advised me to see you because you're dealing with labour matters in the Central Office."

"But how can I recommend an increase without satisfying myself? I've to ensure that the wages already fixed are commensurate with the cost of living. There has to be a meeting with representatives of labour. Their view-points must be recorded. It's not a simple affair." "Shibdas looked at the sedate face of the Thikedar..

Ramautar hesitated for a moment and then tried to play his trump card.

"I know you've your difficulties. But I hope you would do your best to help the poor farm labourers. Incidentally, there was a marriage of your sister recently. I've brought a small present for the couple. Please do accept it." He handed over an envelope containing two hundred rupees.

Shibdas stood transfixed on the ground. His eyes shone with an uncanny fire. There was slight tremor in his erect frame. He stared at Ramautar for a moment and then blurted out:

"Keep that envelope with you, Thikedar Saheb. I may be poor but I can't sell my conscience. God has given you plenty. You may distribute the money to the famished villagers of Waini. Or if you like, you may throw it in the waters of Burhi Gandak. As a conscientious Government servant I will examine the proposal on merits, when it comes to me."

A crest-fallen Thikedar took leave and proceeded towards Waini Bazar. He realised that there were Babus and Babus. Shibdas Babu was so unlike Akhileswar Babu whom he had befriended and won over. What a sad error of judgment!

The following afternoon there was another visitor to Shibdas. He was accompanied by a sprightly girl of about the same age as Benu or might be a little younger than him. When Benu answered the knock on the door and opened it to admit the visitor inside, he was greatly surprised.

"You Sujata? I never did expect that you'll visit us." Benu was excited and hurriedly brought in a chair for Mishraji, after saying the customary "namaste". Then he held Sujata by the hand and took her inside the house. "Look! Who's come," Benu said to Mejoma and introduced Sujata to her as his school friend. Then he informed his brother that Mishraji of Mahmuda was waiting to see him.

Shibdas knew Ramanand Mishra too well. In fact he held him in great respect. There was no zemindar as kind-hearted and as devoutly religious as Mishraji. Although rich by any standard, Ramanand Mishra never boasted of his wealth. In fact he lived like a country gentleman of refined manners.

"It's a great honour to receive you in our humble household," said Shibdas after the customary courtesies.

"No, no. Don't mention that," Ramanand interjected. Shibdas Babu, please don't put me to shame by showering praises which I don't deserve. I'm aware of your family background. You yourself come from a distinguished zemindar family whose services to Muzaffarpur town are too well-known. My friend Rambilas has told me all about you. I had been to Muzaffarpur and he especially asked me to meet you. I came last week but you had gone to Benaras.

"Yes," Shibdas said. "My sister's marriage was celebrated there. We returned only three days back. Excuse me. Let me look up your daughter..."

"Sujata," Ramanand said, "was reading in the *Pathshala* (primary school) where your brother Benu was a student. Now she's in a girl's school. Benu and Sujata are great friends."

Benu entered the room with Sujata. He put down on a tripod two plates of sweets and some cut pieces of guava for Sujata and Mishraji. "We've a guava tree in the courtyard. Sujata has seen it. I can climb up the tree," Benu said.

"That's like a brave boy." Ramanand Mishra smiled. Shibdas brought a cup of tea and a paan (betel leaf). Sujata flitted outside with Benu, leaving her father to talk to Benu's brother.

"Hi, Benu Bhaiya! What tree is that?"

"That's tagar. It gives white flowers with a tinge of yellow. My father had planted it. There's another tree on the left side of the path-way."

"Where's your father," Sujata asked.

"He's no more. Gone to God in the Heavens. I've no mother either. Mejoma is like my mother. But she's really my aunt."

Sujata's face fell. A sadness crept in her opal eyes.

"Why don't you come more often to our house. My mother loves you," she said.

"I know. I'll go when I get a cycle. Dwarka doesn't take me to Mahmuda," Benu said.

Within the room Ramanand mentioned to Shibdas that Rambilas had given him a thousand rupees along with a letter. The money, he had said, was a gift to his sister whose marriage ceremony he could not attend. Then while handing over the money and the letter to Shibdas Ramanand gave him a small packet. "This is a gift from Sujata's mother to Benu's sister. Don't say 'no'. My wife will be sad if you refuse it. Rambilas is a personal friend of mine, and your brother, Benu, is very dear to us. Take it to be a gift for Benu's sister. I'll tell you what the packet contains. There is a Benaras silk sari and some money. It's a common custom in our family to give presents on auspicious occasions."

Shibdas was overwhelmed. "I don't know what to say. I can't refuse it. But the money..."

"The money is nothing," Ramanand clasped the hands of Shibdas. "It's a token of love from a mother to a daughter. My wife Sumitra looks upon Benu as her son. So she's mother to Benu's sister also." Shibdas could not say "no".

Before departing Ramanand mentioned to Shibdas about the strike in Naulakha and the circumstances which had led to his arrest. He also narrated the hard and grim fight of the villagers against poverty. Their wages were only rupees five per month. With this meagre money they could hardly maintain their families.

"Why five?" Shibdas was surprised. "The Thikedar is being paid by the Naulakha at the rate of rupees ten per labourer. Obviously five rupees are going into the pockets of that Thikedar."

Ramanand was shocked. What a perfidy! What a gross dishonesty! That the Thikedar would underpay the ignorant, illiterate and famished villagers, and deny their families what was their due, and instead fill his own coffers, was utterly unthinkable. A wolf was stalking the countryside. The sooner it was chased away the better. Ramanand thanked Shibdas for his hospitality and left for Mahmuda with Sujata.

After the visitors had gone, Shibdas took the gift given by Mishraji to Mejoma. He opened the packet. There was a glistening silken sari and an envelope. Shibdas opened the envelope. There was a small card with the words: "With love to Benu's sister—Sumitra." Inside the envelope there were five hundred rupees. Shibdas was flabbergasted. "O God! What's this! How can I accept this money, Mejoma? I may be poor and in desperate need of money to pay off debts, but I never asked for it," he said with eyes moist with tears.

Mejoma comforted him. "Shibdas, don't think it's charity. It's the gift of God. Haven't you heard of the *Ahaituki Kripa* (Unmotivated kindness) of the Lord. The Lord lavishes his kindness to his devotees in various ways. We in our ignorance think that we earn or achieve a thing. But in reality it is He who helps us to achieve directly or indirectly. Since Sita's marriage is already over, let the sari be given to Babla's mother." Benu's sister-in-law was near at hand. She shrugged her head. "No. That couldn't be. I won't accept it. I'm well content with the coarse cloth which my husband has given to me. Let the sari be kept till Sita's return with her husband," she said.

Benu noticed that his Dada's face was lit up with an unfamiliar light. It was light from the Heavens, Benu thought.

XIX ENCOUNTERS

Morning in Naulakha.

When the big bell in the Central Office was struck nine times by the sentry on duty a long procession began to wend its way through the locality known as Penj-Ghar towards the Experimental Farm raising in a full-throated voice the slogan "Sarkar ki Jai Ho". Who asked the processionists to raise this slogan was not clear. Badri Babu of the Entomology Section was the first to spot Faku Mian and Sundar Pasi among the processionists and he swore that he saw these two persons raise their hands before others did, and give a lead in slogan-shouting. Rahim Khan of the Botany Department went a step farther. He heard another slogan, though on a low pitch, "*Baniya chaal nahi chalega*" (the moves of the traders will fail). What it meant Rahim Khan could not tell. But the ubiquitous Banwari mentioned that the marchers ranted against the upper castes, who, in the estimation of the Harijans, were baniyas or traders or blood suckers. What the hell did it mean? Banwari pursed his lips and turned his bike towards the farm office.

From his office window Birjoo Babu looked at the slogan-shouting processionists and then twirled his whiskers. His dose of medicine had worked. The Thikedar had been hustled to action. "God! My pension is now secure," he folded his hands and offered silent prayers to his deity.

Akhileswar was closeted with Burra Babu and both shook hands as if to cement a new-found friendship.

Sitting in his Waini house, Ramautar opened his bottle of whisky and filled a glass. One-half of his battle was over. Half the labour force had reported for duty.

The Babus of Naulakha heaved a sigh of relief; no more dish-washing and drawing of water; no more frayed tempers and quarrels with housewives.

In her shanty hut Dudhia rolled on her cot after a deep slumber. The previous night had been too hectic, too onerous. She must now rest her limbs and in the afternoon meet her paramour and demand her price.

*

Choudhuri Chhoteylal was the first person to break the news of the escape of Ratna to Ramdas, as the latter prepared to go to Natwarlal's

garden house around mid-day. Lots of work had to be done. Ratna had to be dressed up and taken in Natwarlal's phaeton. He had not met Ratna. She must be, as was her habit, in the garden plucking flowers and leaves for the *pūja* or gone to the grocer to collect the particular brand of tobacco which was relished by Ramdas. Fortified with these comforting thoughts Ramdas had made no inquiries at all about Ratna.

"Ram Ram". Choudhuri Chchoteylal cast a suspicious glance around before accosting Ramdas. "Huzur! The bird's flown."

"What?" Ramdas stopped in his gait and looked straight at the face of the Sahukar.

"I mean Ratna has fled," Choudhuri said.

"Whereto?"

"To Mahmuda. The zemindar's wife came to the temple and Ratna fell at her feet. She went with Sumitra Devi in a *palki* (palanquin)."

"O Hell! What shall I do now? How shall I show my face to Natwarlal. Damn that Mahmuda zemindar. Five hundred rupees. I lose my five hundred rupees! O God!"

Babu Ramdas flew in a high rage and ran in the direction of the market, where he hailed a tum-tum and proceeded towards Mahmuda *via* Waini Bazar. What business they had to interfere in his private affairs? He must demand the return of Ratna. He would take up cudgels against that pseudo-philanthropist zemindar of Mahmuda, Ramanand Mishra.

Babu Ramdas took to the road and in less than an hour he was on Mahmuda soil. He took the path by the side of embankment and proceeded towards the mango-grove. Ramdas was familiar with the contours of Mahmuda and he knew too well that beyond the mango-grove was the residence of Ramanand Mishra.

"Ramdasji, Ram Ram", a voice hailed him from behind. Ramdas looked back. The person standing behind him was no other than Ramanand Mishra, the person he longed to see.

"You look tired. Come to my house, take a glass of water and rest for a while," Ramanand said.

"No, no. I've come on business. I've to talk you," Ramdas struck a harsh note.

"That's very good but the mango-grove isn't a proper place for talk. Let's go to the kutchery (office) outside the house," Ramanand said.

Ramdas controlled his rising temper and followed Ramanand to his office. He refused to take water proffered to him by Ramanand.

"I haven't come for a *dawat* (feast). I've come to talk about a serious matter," he said brusquely.

"Then do," Ramanand answered suavely. He asked his munshi (clerk) to leave them alone.

Ramdas told Ramanand about what he had heard from Choudhuri Chhoteylal. His maid-servant Ratna, whom he had obtained from her mother at Kashi on payment of two hundred rupees for doing menial work at the temple, had been forcibly taken away by... I mean by your..."

"Forcibly taken away?" Ramanand cut him short. "You'll hear from Ratna herself."

Ramanand had been posted with all the information concerning Ratna by Sumitra Devi. He had supported her action. "To give shelter to the shelterless is no sin," he had briefly commented when Sumitra had narrated the sequence of events.

Ratna was called to the kutchery. She came haltingly with an ashen face. Another confrontation with the man was abhorrent to her. "May the goddess protect me," she prayed in her mind as she stood before Ramdas and her master, Ramanand Mishra.

"Now Ratna," Ramanand said. "You'll tell freely and frankly whether you came here voluntarily or whether you're forced to come."

Ratna looked downwards and said in a voice quivering with emotion, "I came of my own accord."

"How old are you?" Ramanand asked.

"I'm past eighteen," Ratna said.

"Then you're a major and you can take your own decision. Now tell me, would you like to go back to the temple and work with Ramdasji", Ramanand queried.

"No," Ratna replied without lifting her face.

"I won't ask to state the reason. You may go inside."

When Ratna departed Ramanand looked at the crestfallen face of Ramdas. He wondered what the temple executive would do now. Would he shout at Ratna, call her back and shower a hundred curses and give

threats, real or imaginary. But Ramdas did not do anything of the sort. He sat motionless. Ramanand broke the ice.

"Ramdasji, Ratna is not a bonded labour. No one has the right to keep slaves for lives and extract work out of them, and starve them till they die. The sooner this system of bonded labour goes, the better it is for our country. It debases a man and it kills one's conscience; it creates a class of people who are no better than bloodsucking beasts of the canine family. I know what you're thinking. You purchased Ratna for two-hundred rupees. I'll compensate you for your loss."

Ramanand called Munshiji and asked him to give five hundred rupees to Babu Ramdas. "Now I think you can sleep in peace," Ramanand said.

Ramdas got up, grabbed the money, said "Namaste" to Ramanand and took the road to Dighra. He must report to Natwarlal in the afternoon. Well, he lost the promised five hundred rupees from Natwarlal but he regained the money from Ramanand. Not a bad bargain after all.

Scarcely had Ramdas reached the temple premises when Ramautar met him near the steps and conveyed the welcome news of the failure of the strike. "The Chipiatoli people have rejoined work," Ramautar said.

Ramdas was surprised to hear the news. He glowered at Ramautar and burst out: "You, Ramautar, are happy because the Harijans and the Muslims have sabotaged the joint strike. Don't you realise the consequences? The caste Hindus here in Dighra and elsewhere will rise as one man and play hell with Chipiatoli. I asked you to patch up with the strikers, but you didn't listen. Now you've to face the music. If my judgment is correct, I apprehend trouble this very night. My God! So many events crowded in one day. First Ratna gone, then the strike aborted, then the confrontation with Ramanand Mishra. The meeting with Natwarlal is yet to take place. I don't know what to do."

Ramdas sat down on the temple steps to think. Ramautar held him by the hand and conducted him to his room. Then he brought out a bottle from his pocket and poured some liquor in a glass. "Take it, you'll feel better". Ramdas drank off the liquid and closed his eyes to ponder over the move on the chess-board.

"What's this Ratna affair," Ramautar asked.

Ramdas related the story beginning from the report of the Sahukar to the un-scheduled meeting with Ramanand Mishra.

"You can't take it lying down," Ramautar stamped his foot on the ground. "Set the Paltanias on the sadhu zemindar of Mahmuda."

Ramdas eyed Ramautar through the corners of his eyes. "It's no simple matter, Ramautar. You try to save you own skin first. And take care of that sweet little thing of yours—that devil of a woman, Dudhia. If I'm not mistaken it's all her machinations which have upset the apple-cart of the strikers. Should there be any trouble you, Ramautar, and your glamorous paramour Dudhia, will be the first targets of the trouble-shooters. The Paltanias work for money. If they serve you for money, they may serve others also. Therefore beware. Now for god's sake leave me alone. How to face Natwarlal in the evening worries me."

Ramautar was a sad man as he came out of Ramdas's room. He had lot of work to do in Naulakha and Waini. He must also see Dudhia in her hut in Waini Bazar and warn her of the impending trouble.

*

The road from Samastipur to Waini was good in stretches. A part of the road passed through an overgrowth of *shisham* and *babul*. For journeying to Waini one had to traverse through the jungle. The other alternative route was *via* Waini station but that was about eighteen miles—twelve miles by train to Waini station and six miles from the station to the Naulakha. For reaching Natwarlal's garden house from Samastipur a motorist or a cyclist had to use the shorter by-pass through the jungle.

Bahu Dai had already informed her Babuas (boys) in the Bairia Dhaf that Ratna had bolted. She had taken shelter in the estate of Ramanand Mishra. Ramdas's trip to Mahmuda to secure the return of Ratna had proved to be abortive. It was likely that he would report the developments to his master, Natwarlal, resting in the garden house, where the Gora Saheb (the Englishman) was expected to join him in the evening drinking party blissfully ignorant of the fact that there wouldn't be any nautch girl.

At the command of Tapeswar, Pinto and Konar had positioned themselves in the jungle overlooking the stretch of road leading to Natwarlal's garden house. Tapeswar had warned: "No wanton killing. Be sure of the identity of the Saheb. Fulia's death must be avenged. As for Natwarlal he has to pay the price of his sin."

The clock on the mantel-piece of Natwarlal's lavishly furnished living room was indicating the hour of four. But still there was no trace of Ramdas. Natwarlal took a peg of whisky and paced up and down on the

carpeted floor and grunted: "Why should he be late? Why the hell he's not here yet with that pretty bird, Ratna." He called the butler and inquired about the preparations for dinner. "All's going on well, Sir," butler Bashir Khan replied rubbing his oily palm in a duster. "Is anything wrong, sir?" "Wrong? No. Get me some more drink," Natwarlal wryly said. Bashir Khan brought a bottle and a glass and placed them on the table. He cast a glance at his master and then left unobtrusively for the kitchen. Four-thirty. Still no trace of Ramdas. "That bastard coachman must have taken a mid-day siesta," Natwarlal cursed the slovenly *sais* using the choicest invectives which came to his lips effortlessly.

Natwarlal looked out of the window towards the tall, towering trees outside his garden house. A darkness was enveloping the trunks and branches. They swayed slowly at first, and then rapidly. "What's happening there?" Natwarlal said to himself, utterly perplexed. He was alone in the spacious drawing room, in the midst of dark elemental forces outside. The solidified darkness appeared to move, inch by inch, towards his bungalow. Natwarlal poured some whisky in the glass and drank it. Then he threw the glass out of the window towards the boundary wall. The mass of dense dark cloud—if cloud it was—appeared to move. Then through the cloud of darkness peered a face familiar—too familiar—to Natwarlal. Satyabati? His wife Satyabati? The lady whom he had strangled to death because she wouldn't like that another woman should share the bed with her husband. What? Satyabati here? Natwarlal began to sweat. He tried to call the butler but his voice was mute. Then the cloud became thinner. Another figure appeared bedecked in jewellery. Natwarlal gaped. Who? Fulia? You too, dressed up in those imitation ornaments which I gave you? The wan feminine face showed a mark on her neck. What? Hanged yourself to death? O my God!? Natwarlal slumped on the cushioned sofa. Now the darkness was near total. He could scarcely lift his face. His whole frame quivered. He stretched his hands to hold the table and stand up but failed. Something obnoxious, something unsavoury was coursing through the blood, to his heart and to his brain. A foam gathered in his mouth. His eyes dilated, his breathing became faint and irregular. He made one last desperate effort to stand up but collapsed on the floor. The contents of the whisky bottle drenched the carpet.

Natwarlal did not see or feel the presence of two armed youngmen who had silently intruded into the room through the window.

"Pinto," said the younger of the two, "the man's dead. Somebody seems to have done a fine job."

"Good. No need to expend a bullet," said the other man. "Now, let's go, Konar, to tackle the Saheb." They departed as softly as they had come.

When Ramdas entered the living room he found his master lying on the woollen carpet with eyes transfixed on the outer window. An empty bottle with its contents upturned lay on the floor beside the sprawling figure. Ramdas picked up the bottle and grinned. He had played his cards exceedingly well.

*

Half-a dozen workers were furiously at work at the Samastipur-Waini by-pass road, about a mile from the garden house of zemindar Natwarlal. "Road under repair" signs were put up at some distance from the point where the road traversed through the jungle. A trench, four feet wide, was being dug so as to make it impossible for any vehicle, mechanical or otherwise, to cross. Only a strip at one end allowed pedestrians to move from one side to another. To the query of an inquisitive traveller, the head gangman replied: "The road has sunk and needs a repair." "*Thik hai, thik hai* (O.K. OK.). *Zara jaldi karna. Zara jaldi karna.* Collector *saab ki gari aayegi*". (Please hasten. The Collector's car will come soon). The traveller proceeded towards Waini satisfied with the repair work.

Pinto looked into the eyes of Konar. Then he looked at his watch. Five O'clock. The Collector's car was not expected before six. "Look, Konar," Pinto said, "you know the Collector by face. Therefore you should sit behind the bush on the right and keep a watch. If it's that infamous, despicable, flesh-hunting Collector..." "Collins," added Konar.

"Yes, Collins. You shouldn't hesitate to pull the trigger. I'll take care of his attendant or chauffeur, whoever he may be."

"Should there be a woman?" Konar asked.

"No. There won't be any woman. A decent woman does not like to see her man indulging in excesses with another woman. However, we won't take chances. Remember, no shooting if the person is other than Collins." Suddenly, the car came to a stop. The driver said:

"Huzoor! The road's cut. Can't proceed. There's no by-pass. Jungles on both sides," the chauffeur said.

Konar adjusted his rifle. He craned his neck to have a better view of the passenger, should he alight.

"Damn it. Who's done it?" swore the Saheb and got down from the Ford. Konar saw his face fully, perfectly. The Saheb was not Collins. What a disappointment!

The Saheb made a survey of the surrounding area and asked the driver if there was any alternate road to Waini.

"None, Sir," the driver said. "You've to go back to Samastipur. Then proceed to Waini Station by train. There's no alternate road to Waini."

"O hell." The Saheb was obviously exasperated. "Can't attend the zemindar's dinner. Reverse the car and proceed to Samastipur."

As the car sped away Konar came out of his hide-out. He said to Pinto: "That was Richardson, the Deputy Collector. He's new in the area. He doesn't know what zemindar's parties are like. Why shoot down an innocent man?"

"That's exactly what our leader had said: Never indulge in wanton killing. Punish the oppressor but spare the gentle. There're Sahebs and Sahebs, Konar. Collins and Richardson are poles apart."

Before returning to Bairia Dhaf the Babuas had closed the ditch and levelled the ground again.

XX

UNKINDEST CUT OF ALL

Bholua, the brain behind the strikers, unexpectedly re-appeared in Mahmuda on the tenth day of the strike. The news that he got was most unpalatable. The strike had fizzled out due to the unilateral action of the Chipiatoli workers, who reported for duty in the morning. He bit his thumb, uttered a four-lettered curse, and swore revenge. Susal Party did not spare the traitors. This was the basic tenet of the neo-socialistic philosophy which Bholua had learnt in the closed door meetings in Muzaffarpur's Purani Bazar. A traitor must be finished off. But the position was somewhat complicated when a whole group, or a whole mohalla (locality) or a whole village went down the slippery path of anti-socialism. Bholua had heard such slogans as "Down with traitors". "Down with the enemies of socialism". "Down with the face-changers" but he had not learnt the tactics too deal with mass deviationists in a peaceful manner. Bholua thought that the best course would be to call a meeting in the chaupal to ascertain the views of the strikers and decide on the course of action. The participants in the meeting would be all caste Hindus. Bholua went from door to door and enlisted the support of a dozen young and active kamgars (labourers). He sent them to Bhuskaul, Dighra and Waini to explain to the fellow kamgars the gravity of the situation, a situation which could not be anticipated, and the need to chalk out a plan of action. All should meet at the chaupal in Mahmuda at ten in the following morning.

That was perfectly business-like and democratic. "Consensus". "Consent of the people". "Majority decision". Bholua knew these were high-sounding words to fool the masses. Important decisions were always taken by a select few. A trained cadre-hand like him knew this all too well. Even before the emissaries sent by Bholua to the neighbouring villages had returned, Bholua conferred with his trusted lieutenants, his confidantes, Rampreet, Somna and Bishun and explained to them his plan of action. The Chipiatoli *haramis* (ungrateful fellows) had let them down. And that *kutia* (bitch) was instrumental in dividing the ranks by her blandishments. They must pay the price for their follies.

"And that *Saitan* (devil) Thikedar," added Rampreet.

"Yes, yes, Ramautar also," Bholua assented. Now our scriptures say that the wicked should be punished. They cannot escape. What we must do is to teach those *chamars*, *kahars* and their like a lesson which they will not forget."

"Burn down their huts," said Bishun. Bholua looked at him with an approving nod. "Tomorrow night the Paltaniyas will do their work. We'll just see and watch," Bholua confided to his trusted *chelas* (disciples). That Sahukar Choudhury would be made to foot the bill of Paltaniyas. Now tomorrow we meet at the chaupal."

None felt the need to invite the leading lights of Mahmuda, Dighra, Bhuskaul or Waini. It was primarily a meeting of the strikers and the strike leaders. They had to decide whether to report for duty or to continue the strike irrespective of the unilateral decision of the Chipiatoli workers.

From nine in the morning the villagers started coming to the venue of the meeting. They came in twos and threes. Some came on bullock carts. Most came on foot. A pall of dust gathered around their feet. Poverty was writ large in their faces but they held their heads high. They had implicit faith in their leaders. *Hookas* (smoking pipes) were circulated among the gathering. Some preferred to chew the dried tobacco-leaf; others preferred the betel-nut. An air of expectancy was evident.

Amid shouts of "Bholua zindabad", Bholua took the rostrum without any fuss. He was the Convenor and hence had every right to preside. None demurred. Bholua in a short fiery speech explained the reasons for the failure of the strike. That dishonest Thikedar had, through his mistress Dudhia, lured the Harijans and the Muslim bhaiyas (brothers) of Chipiatoli back to work making a false statement to the effect that the Naulakha Sahebs had enhanced their wages. "Brothers!," Bholua said, "you've toiled hard but the Chipiatoli people will reap the benefits. They've backed out of the solemn agreement to stand united. They've gone back to work. Whereas you're still on strike. Isn't this treachery? Isn't this the height of dishonesty? Aren't they traitors? Ravana paid the extreme penalty of death for his misdeeds. Ram didn't spare him. So the Chipiatoli workers wouldn't escape the wrath of god. Retribution will come."

"Death to the traitors," shouted a voice.

"We won't say that. If God so wills, death will come sooner or later. It comes in various ways. In the shape of flood, famine...", Bholua paused.

"And fire," completed Rampreet.

"Yes, the wrath of God may take the shape of fire," Bholua said. My advice to you is to wait for a day. We'll find out if the news of wage increase is correct. Then you may report to work. Possibly tomorrow."

"Bholua zindabad" shouts reverberated in the air as the meeting came to an end.

One of the interested onlookers was Choudhury Chchoteylal, the Sahukar. He had been specially invited by Bholua to witness the show.

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Choudhury Chchoteylal felt a sort of elation because he alone out of all the dignitaries in Mahmuda and adjoining villages had been invited to the meeting. But why on earth were the strikers talking of fire and flood and traitors? They also mentioned about Dudhia and Ramautar. Well, he did not have any love for Ramautar. That promiscuous Thikedar despised him. Not only despised but threatened him with dire action. "The Swaraji dacoits would burn you along with your house," that is what he had said to him. "Burn me?" "Burn your foot." "Burn your toddy - sweet mistress Dudhia". "Bloody son-of-a-bitch". Chchoteylal muttered the curses and invectives against the invisible adversary and took a turn to the left. He must meet Babu Ramanand Mishra and Babu Viswanath Prasad and apprise them of the events. They were the people who mattered in village circles. He must tell them that something sinister was brewing up.

On the way to Mishraji's house the Sahukar, by a sheer coincidence, came face to face with Babu Viswanath Prasad. "Ram Ram, Viswanathji," he said. "Ram Ram, Chaudhuriji. What's the matter? You look disturbed," Babu Viswanath Prasad said, giving a quick glance at the dishevelled hairs and the dusty feet of the Sahukar.

"I'm coming from a meeting."

"What meeting?"

Chchoteylal opened his big mouth in an attempt to smile but what he produced was a leer. Fate had conferred on him the distinction that was his due. Was it not a matter of gratification that an important Susal leader like Bholua had personally invited him to the meeting. Of course Bholua had taken a loan from him by pawning his utensils.

Choudhury Chchoteylal pressed his hands in apparent glee and narrated the sequence of events beginning from Bholua's unscheduled call and borrowing a sum of rupees one hundred to the seemingly spirited lecture delivered by the susal leader to the striking kamgars of Mahmuda and other villages.

"You say that they talked of traitors and fire?" Viswanath Babu asked.

"Yes, they did."

"And they mentioned the names of Ramautar and Dudhia?"

"Yes, they did."

"Well, Chaudhuri, you needn't take the trouble of meeting Mishraji. You better go and guard your treasures". Babu Viswanath Prasad parted company from Chhoteylal and proceeded to the house of Ramanand Mishra, where among others of the family, he met a youngman whom he had never seen before.

"This is my nephew, Sudhakar. He's from Patna. He's finished his law," Babu Ramanand Mishra said.

"That's nice. I hope he's enjoying his stay in Mahmuda."

"He says it's exciting. Here so many things happen". Ramanand Mishra smiled.

"That's true. Events here move with kaleidoscopic swiftness. I've heard that the biggest drama is going to be staged—here in your Mahmuda." Babu Viswanath sounded enigmatic.

"Biggest drama? What do you mean?" Ramanand asked.

Babu Viswanath Prasad unfolded the tale which he had heard from the Sahukar. "It seems there'll be trouble," he concluded.

Ramanand pondered for a while and then said. "For the present I would request you to send Shakuntala to Chipiatoli to persuade Dudhia to leave the village for sometime. She's a woman and a woman in our society deserves protection. I'll send Sudhakar in the afternoon to Waini to apprise the police post there of a possible breach of peace. Whether they would care to post some constables here I don't know. Let's watch the developments in Mahmuda and Bhuskaul."

"What about Thikedar Ramautar?" Viswanath Prasad asked.

"He can fend for himself. He's lighted the fire and it's for him to extinguish it."

Babu Viswanath Prasad did not tarry long. Before parting he said to Sudhakar, "I'll be delighted to see you at our place." To Ramanand Mishra he said, "Hope nothing would happen to disturb the peace. I'll send Shakuntala to contact Dudhia."

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The shadows of the evening were lengthening. A cool air blew across

the Burhi Gandak. A boatman was singing as he pulled the oars. Shakuntala threw a *chadar* (shawl) over her shoulders and walked briskly over the embankment until she reached the outskirts of Chipiatoli. Avoiding the bazar she took a side-walk and wended her way through the low-roofed thatched houses. Here and there bare-bodied urchins dashed in and out of the huts and chased the straying pigs out to forage for food. Lighted kerosene *kupias* (lamps) cast flickering shadows as men and women passed across the narrow cobbled lanes. Day's work was over and a night of merriment awaited them. The nightmare of *hartal* (strike) would not haunt them any more.

Shakuntala had no difficulty in locating Dudhia's hut at the far end of the village. She had come earlier also along with a team of social workers from Patna. They were conducting a survey of Harijan bustees. What happened to their report Shakuntala did not know.

Dudhia lived well. Hers was a semi-permanent structure with tiles on the roof. Because of the thick padding of straw rain did not seep in. Shakuntala tapped at the closed door of Dudhia's hut. There was no response. Then she knocked again. A feminine voice answered. Then the door opened and Dudhia was in view. Obviously she was in the kitchen preparing for the night's meal.

Before Dudhia could utter any word of welcome Shakuntala gripped her by the arm and gasped out; "Where's your father?" "He's gone to Samastipur," Dudhia said apparently surprised at the behaviour of Shakuntala. "Dudhia", Shakuntala blurted out, "your life's in danger. You must flee. There's a talk of attack on your person by the Paltanias."

"Why?"

"For your part in the strike, I mean for sabotaging the strike from within."

"I won't leave my house."

"Don't be a fool, Dudhia. I've taken the trouble to come at this hour to warn you of the danger. There's a talk..."

"What talk?"

"Talk of teaching the Harijans a lesson. There's no time, Dudhia. Come with me to my place. From there you may proceed to Samastipur. Let the storm pass over and then you may return."

"Do you think I'll run away like a coward leaving my kinsmen, my community, to face the *goondas*."

Shakuntala grew impatient. She told Dudhia that time was running out. Anything might happen. The trouble might erupt in that night itself. She assured Dudhia that the Waini Police Post had been alerted and Police help was expected any moment. But even then no chance should be taken.

Dudhia pondered for a while. Then she went inside her hut, changed her clothes, took a bag and accompanied Shakuntala to Bhuskaul. Shakuntala provided Dudhia with enough money for a week's stay in Samastipur.

Chaudhury Chchoteylal had a restless day. He could not relish his lunch. He did not have his mid-day siesta. The fiery speeches in the morning and the talk of fire and blood greatly disturbed him. Why should they mention the names of Dudhia and Ramautar unless they intended to do some mischief. Well, the Thikedar might not be well-disposed towards him, but still *insanyat* (humanity) prompted him to caution him. Ramautar might be in his Waini residence but a servant stayed at his Mahmuda *kothi* (house). He would go there and brief the boy-servant. Let him report to his master. And Dudhia? That was rather difficult. He could not go all the way to Chipiatoli where Dudhia lived. His presence in the village might raise suspicions. "Let things take their own course," Choudhuri Chchoteylal murmured to himself. But in the afternoon he was out of his *kothi* and proceeded straight towards Chipiatoli. Hardly had he emerged from the side-track into the main road when the Thikedar's tum-tum suddenly pulled up before him with a screeching noise.

"Ram, Ram Thikedarji. I was going to your place."

"But this is the way to Chipiatoli. What's the matter Chchoteylal? Come, speak out."

Chaudhuri was confused. He was indeed going to Chipiatoli to meet Dudhia but the ominous shadow of the Thikedar had suddenly crossed his path. He blabbered:

"I er.. I was going to see Dudhia. From there I wanted to come to your place."

Dudhia? Ramautar was surprised. "You wouldn't go to Dudhia unless there's something important. What's it Chaudhuri?" Ramautar got down from tum-tum and twisted Chchoteylal's arm and shook his frame. "Tell me the truth or I'll break your neck," Ramautar thundered.

Chchoteylal shuddered. It looked to him as if Death was at his very door. He folded his hands and haltingly told the Thikedar all about the day's happenings. In particular, he related the proceedings of the strikers'

meeting where names of Dudhia and Ramautar were bandied about. "They're talking of revenge for the failure of the strike," Chaudhuri said.

It did not take Ramautar long to realise the gravity of the situation. Dudhia's life was in danger. He did not care for himself. He must take away Dudhia from her Chipiatoli hut. After all it was he who had tutored Dudhia to act in the way she did. Ramautar made Chchoteylal mount his tum-tum and then dashed towards Chipiatoli. Dudhia's hut was empty. She was not there. None could tell him about her whereabouts. A crest-fallen Ramautar mounted his tum-tum with Chaudhuri seated behind him and raced towards his Waini residence. Dudhia had not come there. Where could she have gone? Could she have gone to her ramshackle shop or to her father's rendezvous—the *bhati khana*? Ramautar looked up both these places but there was no trace of Dudhia. Then it dawned upon him that Dudhia could have known about the rumblings in the bazar, and proceeded to his Mahmuda house. It was getting dark. Ramautar lighted the two lamps attached to his tum-tum and with Chchoteylal as his mute passenger proceeded towards Mahmuda. The rippling waters of the Burhi Gandak and the blue curling smoke from the kitchen windows signified the rhythm of life in complete harmony with the pulsations in Nature. As if in a flash Chchoteylal visualised his past when life was a great thrilling experience, when to live and to be young was an absolute joy. That life he had lost. That experience he had long since forfeited. What was now left was an wizened frame *sans* all sweet sensations, all finer feelings. He was now a lump of clod or a burnt log of wood. And worse still he had lost his soul. God! What should he do?

Chchoteylal wanted to jump from Ramautar's tum-tum and be crushed by the revolving wheel. Or to be flung on the barren earth as a dead wood. Ashes. Yes, he would like to be crushed, crumbled and burnt to ashes. That would partly wash away his sins. That would be his atonement for years of deceit, thuggery and loot. He had robbed the poor to amass wealth. But to what purpose? And for whom? Death was knocking at the door. A cloak of darkness suddenly floated before his eyes. He sat dazed as if in a trance. Only when Ramautar stopped his tum-tum with a sudden jolt at the footsteps of his Mahmuda house did Chaudhuri Chchoteylal open his eyes and dismount on the solid ground. He had regained his normalcy. He did not know what to do or where to go. Ramautar entered the house. There was no trace of Dudhia. The servant too had vanished. Ramautar lighted the lamp, took Chchoteylal into the living room and asked him to rest on the cot. Then he bolted the room from outside and asked Chaudhuri to wait till he returned.

"Why're you locking me?" A terrified Chaudhuri shrieked.

"So that you don't run away. I'm going to find Dudhia. I'll bring her so that you can tell her what you heard about her at the meeting." Ramautar flung the words and then left his house on the tum-tum.

Events do not move according to the whims of people. Even the best of calculations go awry. Ramanand Mishra had adopted a wait and watch attitude. Little did he know that not far from his native Mahmuda a trouble, sinister in its implications, was brewing up. Sitting in Bhuskaul Shakuntala sensed it. But what could her old and infirm father do to stem the tide? What could she, a woman, do to forestal the dangerous game which the disgruntled elements in Bhuskaul and other places was going to play in league with the musclemen of Imlipatti? Once the Paltaniyas were in the fray, worked up by a liberal dose of *tari*, anything could happen. A hushed silence prevailed in the village as she left Dudhia at the turn of the main road. Darkness loomed everywhere—in the branches of the sturdy *jamun* trees, in the corners of the thatched rows of hutments, in the clumps of bamboos where the jackals nosed their way under the cover of darkness. In Chipiatoli the wage-earners dozed and dozed under the influence of the inebriating drink. Shakuntala shivered. An inextinguishable sensation crept through her fragile frame. Was it fear? Was it a premonition of some grisly happening? No. She must not lose courage. She must not allow fear to overpower her. She called her domestic aid and sent through him a note to Babu Ramanand Mishra. Then she hastened upstairs to report to her father about the meeting with Dudhia.

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Seated on an arm-chair Ramand Mishra was discussing with Sudhakar his scheme for an adult literacy centre in Mahmuda. "Look Sudhakar," Ramanand Mishra was telling, "illiteracy is the cause of our depressed economic situation. How many people can read and write? What do the illiterate folks know about health and sanitation? What do letters and learning mean to the poor villagers. Their reliance on fate is total. In their way of thinking God creates children and He provides food for them. The female child is a curse of God while a male child is a boon. Why? Because a son will, in due course, take to the plough and lighten the burden of his father. Epidemics? They are visitations of evil spirits. They are blissfully ignorant of the fact that lack of sanitation brings in diseases in train. If you attempt to chlorinate a well, they'll resist, thinking you're poisoning the potable water. If you ask the sanitary inspector to vaccinate or inoculate them against small-pox and cholera, you'll find that before long the poor sanitary inspector is literally hounded out of the village. Who could dare to immunise such simpletons? And the result?

Outbreaks of cholera in which thousands are decimated. He would indeed be a brave man who could convince a householder to send the stricken patient to hospital. Therefore, Sudhakar, literacy is a must not only for Mahmuda but for all villages. We shall open a centre in Mahmuda, and I dream of the day when countless such centres would dot our countryside."

Sudhakar was impressed with what his uncle told him. He wanted to say something but then there was a knock on the door. When Sudhakar opened the door he found a man with a letter addressed to Mishraji. Ramanand Mishra hastily opened the letter sent by Shakuntala and read:

"Chachaji, I'm mortally afraid, not for my own sake, but for the sake of the defenceless residents of Chipiatoli. Our irate brothers, out of frustrations arising from the failure of the strike, are out to seek revenge. The Paltanias of Imlipatti are poised for an attack. It may happen at any moment, and may be this very night. Your presence in Chipiatoli may help in diffusing the situation."

Sumitra had heard the tap on the door while engrossed in reading the Ramayana. She folded the book, touched it with her forehead and then placed it on the shelf. Sujata was asleep. She adjusted the pillow, and then hastened to the living room where Ramanand Mishra was engaged in conversation with Sudhakar. Ramanand showed Sumitra the letter sent by Shakuntala. Then acting on a sudden impulse he said to Sudhakar:

"You cycle to Police Station in Waini, Sudhakar. Tell them that some serious trouble is brewing and urgent police help is required. If the police are not responsive, you may contact Shibdas Banerjee, whose quarter is just opposite the P.W.D. Office. He may help you. When you come back look for me in Chipiatoli bazar. I'm going there."

"How can you go alone?," Sumitra remonstrated. "How can you face a frenzied mob? Should there be trouble here who should protect us?"

"Don't get frightened, Sumitra," Ramanand said. "Protection of the weak and helpless is part of our *dharma*. I'll be failing in my duty if I don't stand by the Harijans and the Muslim brothers of Chipiatoli. You stay at home and pray. I'll go and survey the situation. Sudhakar will, of course, come with police aid."

Sumitra did not allow Ramanand to go alone. She sent the trusted servant Ramjivan also with her husband. "May Lord Ram, the ocean of kindness, protect my husband," Sumitra prayed while hastening to the bedside of Sujata.

Hardly had he reached the Mahmuda-Waini Road with Ramjivan walking behind him with a lantern in one hand and a bamboo stick on the other, when Ramaand was startled to see strange flares lighting up the western sky. Columns of smoke circled upstairs and remained suspended in the thick air. Then he heard the beating of drums. Droom. Droom. Droom. The stillness of the night was pierced by the cacophony of hundred voices. Ramanand strained his ears to find the direction they came from. They seemed to converge from several points. Left. Right. Middle. But the fiercest noise appeared to emerge from Chipiatoli side. Ramanand hastened his steps. Then he ran with Ramjivan close at his heels.

A section of the rioters had assembled in front of Thikedar Ramautar's house in Mahmuda. "Burn the *harami's* house (traitor's house)," shouted somebody. "Yes, yes," echoed the mob. With burning kerosene-soaked torches some jumped over the fence and poured kerosene oil on doors and windows, on roof, on heaps of cattle-feed and set them all on fire. Inside the living room Choudhuri Chchoteylal frantically beat against the closed doors and windows and shrieked and cried. His frail frantic wail was drowned in a crescendo of hundred voices "kill, kill". The fire fanned by a swift wind soon engulfed the room where the Sahukar was locked in by that devil of a man—Ramautar.

Ramautar was getting desperate. His horse was panting. He refused to budge. No amount of whipping would make him move. Ramautar left the tum-tum and walked down to the river bank to get some water. His horse was badly in need of water to slake his thirst. All of a sudden torch-bearing desperadoes moved out of the by-lane into the main road. They were shouting "burn, burn, kill, kill." Some one stumbled on Ramautar's tum-tum and exclaimed: "The tum-tum. The *harami's* tum-tum. Let's make a bon-fire of it." "Yes, yes," shouted others. Then in ghoulisg glee they applied a burning torch to the bundle of hay which the tum-tum carried. Whipped up by a sudden fright the horse broke loose and bolted. But he could not proceed far. Out of sheer exhaustion he stumbled on the road and collapsed, never to rise again.

All the time Ramautar watched the scene from a distance hidden behind an upturned boat on the Burhi Gandak bank. As the turmoil subsided, he looked to the left and right, and making sure that the road was clear, darted straight towards Waini Bazar.

A motley club-wielding, torch-bearing crowd had gathered in Chipiatoli. Uttering shouts of "burn, burn, kill, kill" the ruffians converged on

the hut of Dudhia and set it on fire. "Let the *churail* (witch) burn," they said ignorant of the fact that the so-called sorceress had already fled the scene. Lajo, a middle-aged Harijan woman, had a pile of dried cow-dung cakes on one side of her mud hut. Some one threw a burning stick on it and the fuel caught fire instantly. Lajo screamed from her door-step: "My cakes, my cow-dung wakes. O my God! What'll happen to me."

Eighteen-year old Rumia, a buxom girl of Kahar family, had just stepped out of her hut to witness the goings-on when a hoodlum sighted her youthful figure. In a flash he pounced upon her and dragged her to nearby hay-stack followed by more jaw-smashing ruffians. Like ravenous wolves they fell upon her one by one till she fainted. Then to hide evidence of their heinous act they set the whole hay-stack on fire. The fire burnt furiously and with it also burnt the shame of Rumia. Not a soul in the village knew about the gory deed.

Bundu Mian was about to pull down the shutters of his grocery shop when the Paltaniyas descended upon him like a thunderbolt. They dragged the bearded old man, belaboured him and kicked him out of his shop premises. Then they poured kerosene on the bamboo mats and threw lighted torches on them. Within seconds the ramshackle mud-house was on fire. A dazed and distraught Bundu Mian limped away from the site of the blaze into the dark alleys of Chipiatoli.

The whole locality was now in turmoil. Stunned men and women and shrieking children rushed out of their hutments and fled in the direction of the mustard fields. "O hell's here," a man groaned as he bumped against a wall of bamboos, which formed the fringe of a cattle shed.

With cries of "Burn, burn", the bandits ran towards the market place. "To the Mukhia's house" some one shouted. "Yes, yes", roared the mob in unison. "Let's go and burn the damned headman."

But a tall and handsome man stood colossus-like on a raised platform right in the middle of the road, flanked by a solitary attendant. "Halt", shouted the man with hands raised above his head. Almost mesmerised the crowd staggered a few steps backward. "Isn't that the zemindar of Mahmuda," queried some one. "Yes, yes, he is zemindar Ramanand Mishra of Mahmuda," corroborated another. "Mishraji zindabad," a shout went up from behind. Others repeated the slogan and the words "Mishraji zindabad" echoed in the nocturnal air.

"Brothers," shouted Ramanand Mishra, "If you indeed love and respect me, I would ask you to extinguish your torches and leave these precincts. You shouldn't take the law into your own hands. Tomorrow

we'll hold an inquiry. Those who have misled you, incited you to commit the most atrocious crimes, will be handed over to the police authorities to be dealt with according to law. The men-folk of Chipiatoli are poor and illiterate. Some one must have provoked them to act in the way they did. But that does not mean that you'll burn whole villages. Those Harijans and other weaker sections are our own people. They are our kith and kin. If you don't desist you had better kill me first."

A hush fall on the crowd. The silence was ominous.

As Ramanand Mishra alighted from the raised platform and made a move towards the crowd Ramjivan held him by the arm. "Don't proceed, Sir. The crowd's behaviour is unpredictable," he said. Ramanand jerked his hands away and took a step forward. Suddenly from behind a stationary bullock cart a crouching figure emerged and positioning himself behind the back of the unsuspecting Ramjivan struck two fierce blows on the head of Ramanand Mishra, who instantly fell on the ground with blood flowing from a deep gash. As Ramjivan grappled with the assailant, a sharp and piercing whistle broke the prevailing stillness. Realising that the police had come the crowd ran away helter-skelter leaving Ramanand Mishra to his fate. The assailant was soon overpowered and handcuffed. He was Bholua, the self-pro-claimed susal leader.

Ramanand was transported post-haste to the Waini General Hospital where Dr. Michael and his team of surgeons attended to his wound and kept a whole-night vigil by the unconscious patient.

As instructed by his uncle, Sudhakar had cycled to Waini Police Post but he had met with a cold rebuff. The Officer on duty had flatly refused to send any constable without specific order from the Estate Manager. "Trouble or no trouble, we can't move from our post without specific order," the Duty Officer had said rather brusquely. Then Sudhakar had sought the help of Shibdas Babu, whose name had been mentioned to him by Ramanand Mishra. Realising the implications of a communal flare-up in an area contiguous to Naulakha, Shibdas had personally contacted the Estate Manager, Birjoo Babu, and obtained clearance for the despatch of a posse of policemen from Waini Police post.

XXI RECOVERY

While the doctors held a vigil by the bed-side of unconscious Ramanand Mishra in Waini General Hospital. Sumitra Devi sat in deep meditation before her family deity, Madan Gopal. Hours ticked by. Still no sound of any footsteps on the corridors of her house. No tapping on the door. Sujata was in deep slumber. Sumitra prayed: "Be kind to me O, Lord. May you in your infinite kindness protect my husband, for his life appears to be in danger." Tears trickled down Sumitra's cheeks. Suddenly a wailing at the door awakened her from her trance. She bowed before her deity and hastily ran to the door. Opening it she found a dazed Ramjiwan wailing and beating his breast: "Hai, Hai (what a tragedy!). The worst has happened. Why did he go at all. How can I show this bloody face of mine? I'll die. God! What a fate!"

Sumitra held Ramjiwan by the hand and jerked it forcefully. Then she looked at his blood-stained clothes and shuddered. "What's happened, Ramjiwan? Come, tell me quickly? What's happened to your master?" Sumitra mumbled as a shadow crossed her mind. "Is he alive?" She questioned Ramjiwan who was too dazed to say anything. What she gathered from the ramblings of Ramjiwan uttered through sobs and wails was that her husband had been struck unconscious. Her husband's present condition was not known to him.

Without wasting any time Sumitra went to the out-house and awakened Ramu and Ratna. Asking Ratna to look after Sujata, Sumitra ordered Ramu to prepare the bullock-cart and drive her to the Waini Hospital. Ramu, who was astonished to see Mataji (mother) so utterly distraught, lost no time to bring the bullock-cart. Then they set out in the dark guided only by the moonlight.

Inside her house Shakuntala had strange trepidations in her mind. She could not tell her father about the message she had sent to Ramanand Mishra, for that would have upset him completely. She repented her action, knowing as she did the large-heartedness of Mishraji. She was confident that Ramanand Babu would hasten to Chipiatoli to diffuse the combustible situation. What she did not reckon was the possible danger to the person of Mishraji. What if the miscreants, the Paltanias, did some harm to him? The thought was too disturbing. If anything happened to Ramanandji, she alone would be held responsible. How could she show her ignoble face to Sumitraji or Mishraji, even if he escaped with only minor injuries? Shakuntala was utterly confused. She lay tossing on bed the whole night. When the first streaks of light appeared on the

eastern horizon, she got up from her bed and hurriedly prepared herself to go to Mishraji's house. But before she could open the door to step on the verandah, some footsteps were heard, and then a man's voice called out: "Viswanath Babu". Shakuntala opened the door. A youngman with hairs dishevelled, and with stains of blood on his white *dhota* and *kurta* stood before him. She wondered who could this man be and what message he had to deliver.

"My name's Sudhakar. I'm the nephew of Mishraji. I won't tarry. I came to inform Viswanath Babu that my uncle was gravely injured in last night's riot in Chhipatoli and is lying unconscious in Waini Hospital. You're..."

"I'm his daughter, Shakuntala." Saying this she rushed upstairs to her father's room and sobbed aloud: "I've killed him, Babuji (father). I sent him a message to go to Chhipatoli as there was a danger of an impending uprising against the Harijans. And now Mishraji's in Hospital gravely wounded. A gentleman downstairs has brought this message. O what have I done? Who can condone my sin?" Viswanath Babu was shocked beyond measure. Shocked to hear of the tragedy that had overtaken his esteemed friend Ramanand Mishra, and doubly shocked by the almost hysterical behaviour of his daughter, Shakuntala. Hurrying downstairs he met Sudhakar and learnt the details of the incident. Then he asked Sudhakar to comfort Sumitra Devi as best as he could. Presently he would send Shakuntala to take care of her. He himself would proceed to Hospital instantly.

Ratna, the latest entrant to the household of Ramanand Mishra, confidently took charge of Sujata in the absence of Sumitra Devi. She kept her completely at ease by telling interesting tales of the knight-errant coming to awaken the sleeping damsel. To Sujata's questions about the absence of father and mother she had a ready answer: "Babuji has gone to Naulakha to bring Benu Bhaiya and Ma has gone to bring sweets for you and Benu. Wouldn't you like to play with Benu Bhaiya." Sujata was delighted. He had many things to show to Benu Bhaiya. One by one she counted her choicest possessions—the rabbits, the pet cat, Simli, the new-born calf, Brinda, and the watch-dog, Kallu. The dog was so docile that even the cat wouldn't run away from him. And above all the books which Sudhakar Bhaiya had brought from Patna. Benu would love to see them. As Ratna went about doing the morning chores, Sudhakar entered the house and sat down on a chair. He was a picture of sadness. Grief and fatigue made him look worn out and haggard. Ratna guessed that something was amiss. She had seen Sudhakar always as a sprightly youth. She had heard his laughter, his songs, and his delightful words of

endearment for Sujata. She had always kept herself at a safe distance and never intruded into the family assemblage. But today with Sumitra Devi away and Sujata alone in the house, Ratna had to appear before Sudhakar.

"Is anything wrong, Sir?" she asked with eyes to the floor.

Sudhakar raised his tired eyes. Before him was the girl whom he had not seen from close quarters except on that fateful day outside the temple premises.

"Yes. uncle's in hospital, unconscious. Where's aunty? Is she in the Puja room?"

"No. She's gone to the Hospital with Ramu late at night."

"Hospital? I didn't meet her. How did she go?"

"In the bullock-cart."

"I see. That's why I failed to see her. Now look, Ratna. I've to go back at once. Don't worry. Look after Sujata."

As Sudhakar changed his clothes after a quick bath and prepared to leave for Waini Hospital, Ratna brought him a cup of tea and a plate of snacks.

"You haven't taken anything since last night. Please take something," she said. Sudhakar looked at her in surprise. How could a derailed girl could be so solicitous about the comforts of others?

"Thanks," he said. "I won't take anything except tea. If you can give me some hot milk I'll take to Hospital for aunty in the thermos."

As Ratna moved into the pantry, Sudhakar took up the cup of tea. Everything looked so sad and desolate. Even Sujata seemed to have lost her usual ebullience. Her voice was not heard. Where could she be? Just as he looked out of the window he saw a young lady with a scarf thrown across her shoulders moving across the garden path. Sudhakar recognised her as the woman whom he had met for a few seconds in Viswanath Babu's house.

"Shakuntala Devi?" he asked in surprise, opening the door.

"Yes. I've come to atone for my sin. Where is Sumitra Devi?"

"She's gone to hospital. but what do you mean by this talk of sin and atonement?"

"That's a long story. I can't wait. I must go to hospital to see Raman and Babu."

"I'm going there myself. Just waiting for Ratna to bring the milk for aunty".

"Ratna?"

"Yes. She's the new entrant into the household. She lives in the out house. I'll tell you all about her as we go along."

Ratna brought the thermos and passed on to Sudhakar. She was young and attractive. Shakuntala was instantly drawn towards her. Her features, especially her eyes, reminded her of someone whom she knew most intimately. But she brushed aside all thoughts and stepped out on the gravel path with Sudhakar alongside her.

"How do we go? It's full two miles from here. You can't walk that distance," Sudhakar said

"Yes, I can."

"No. no. It's no use tiring oneself. We'll take a tum-tum from the Waini bazar." Sudhakar suggested a *viamedia*.

As they proceeded towards Waini, Sudhakar narrated the incident about Ratna. How she, a destitute girl from Benaras, had been kept as a bonded labour by the administrator of the Kali Mata temple in Dighra. She had sought aunty's protection and now she was in the household. Deliberately he didn't mention about the dangers to her modesty at the hands of Natwarlal. "Ratna's release could be the reason for the cowardly attack on my uncle by the ruffians. But we don't know as yet," Sudhakar said.

Shakuntala was thinking deeply. The talk of Benaras, of Ratna, the destitute girl, had somehow stirred those cells in her brain which generated all powers of reasoning. Those dark eye lashes, those sharp expressions, the shapely mouth and dainty lips, those curls of hair—they appeared to be an exact replica of a face most familiar to her. Well, she must question Ratna about her past and get her doubts resolved.

"You're lost in thought," Sudhakar said as he helped her to mount the tum-tum.

"I'm sorry. I was thinking of Sumitra Devi and Ratna."

Then Shakuntala unfolded the story of the strike in Naulakha—how Ramanandji and her father had supported the strikers, how the machinations of a crafty Thikedar and a Harijan girl, named Dudhia, had rendered the strike infructuous, how the Harijans and the Muslims, in defiance of their solemn pledge to remain united, had backed out and reported for work, how a section of the upper-caste agricultural labourers, egged on by a crafty leader claiming to be a socialist, sought revenge on the defenceless inhabitants of Chipiatoli, and how she, Shakuntala, getting scent of the matter had sent a message to Mishraji to help diffuse the

riotous situation by his gracious presence. "He's universally loved and respected. I could hardly imagine that any evil hand would be raised against his august person. My God! I'm responsible for all this. How shall I atone for my sins? How shall I show my face to Sumitra Devi?" Shakuntala broke down and sobbed.

"Have patience, Shakuntala Devi," Sudhakar said. "Sometimes the most extraordinary things happen. Or else how could one explain this attack on my uncle. I don't know the identity of the assailant but he's been arrested."

*

For full twelve hours Ramanand Mishra lay unconscious. A British surgeon had arrived from Muzaffarpur pursuant to Dr. Michael's SOS. When they emerged from the patient's room, Shibdas ventured to put in a word to Dr. Michael, who was personally known to him. "I hope he'll come round soon. All the system's working well. Have faith in God". Dr. Michael assured him. Shibdas passed on the word to anxious relations and admirers of Ramanand Mishra. Sumitra Devi's eyes were wet with tears. "Surely you had been my son in a previous birth", she said to Shibdas. Shakuntala Devi, Viswanath Babu, Sudhakar and the ever faithful but dazed Ramjivan sat in a row with prayers on their lips. They sat speechless in the corridor waiting for the patient to open his eyes.

Moments ticked away. It was close to midnight when Ramanand Mishra was hit on the head by an iron rod. Now the hands of the clock were veering towards eleven in the morning. There was a flurry among the nursing staff. Dr. Michael was summoned to the patient's room. As he walked to the room, all the assembled visitors almost missed their heart beats. "O God! save him, save him," Sumitra prayed with eyes closed. Soon Dr. Michael came out of the patient's room with a beaming face. Then a nurse called out the name of Sumitra Devi. Like an automaton, Sumitra got up and followed the angel of mercy into the patient's room. There on the hospital bed lay, with a pile of bandages on his head, her husband, her hope, her delight, her very heaven. Slowly she moved near the patient whose eyes spelt recognition.

"Sumitra, where am I?" Ramanand said feebly.

"You're near me, dear, in hospital."

"Hospital?"

"Yes, You're wounded. Shivdas and Sudhakar brought you here. Thanks to god, thanks to my Madan Gopal, you've regained your consciousness."

"What? Was I in a swoon?"

"Yes. Now please don't worry. Don't talk much."

Ramanand closed his eyes in complete serenity with a hand firm in Sumitra's grasp. Love is a great psychic force which transmits energies in a mysterious way from one body to another, from one soul to another. And deeper than love is the power of prayers which a devotee offers to his spiritual Guru or the Lord, who is the epitome of all love. Only when we deviate from the path shown by the Guru, do we miss the light of that love and flounder in darkness.

Among the first callers at Ramanand Mishra's house was his father-in-law, Umanath, and mother-in-law, Shobhana Devi, from Darbhanga. Sumitra burst into sobs, as was natural in such circumstances, to see her parents. Anguish was writ large on their faces. But Umanath was greatly relieved to find that his son-in-law was recuperating fast and gaining strength. Sujata clung nervously to her mother and eyed his grand-parents with a childish curiosity. "O my child, how big you have grown", Shobhana hugged Sujata and kissed her fondly. "Now my dear child," Umanath said, lifting Sujata on his lap, "I'll take you to Darbhanga with me. Won't you go?" Sujata shrugged her head. Both the grand-parents burst into a loud laughter.

For more than a week there was a steady stream of visitors to Ramanand Mishra's house. Visitors came for Patna, Muzaffarpur and Samastipur. The leading Patna dailies eulogised the courage and sacrifice of Ramanand Mishra. They related how a true Gandhian zemindar had almost endangered his life for the protection of the minorities. Among the local callers were Babu Viswanath Prasad, Shakuntala Devi and Babu Shibanarayan of Waini bazar. Shakuntala Devi had in fact visited Ramanand Mishra almost every day and sat by his bed-side. Ramanand Mishra was greatly relieved to know that Dudhia had been persuaded by Shakuntala to leave her hut and proceed to Samastipur on the day of the holocaust. "I had a foreboding," Shakuntala said, "and hence I acted in the manner I did." "You acted wisely," Ramanand said. "How many amongst us realise that the artificial delineation of communities as Hindus and Harijans is illogical and anti-national? You label a person as a *chamar*, a *dushad*, a *julha* but can you dispense with their services? A Harijan sweeper must cleanse your surroundings but still you socially ostracize him. Is it just? Is it moral? A *dhobi* must wash your clothes but he cannot sit in the same room where an upper caste Hindu dwells. Isn't this immoral? Today you're raising a social barrier between the high castes and the low-castes; tomorrow you'd go a step further and say: "Look, I am a Brahmin. I can't sit with the Kayasthas." Then what what'll happen? There would be fragmentation of the society into hundreds of castes and sub-castes. And what would happen to this country,

this India, for whose independence we all are fighting, the young men and women are shedding their blood and the national leaders are brutally beaten up with batons? No, Shakuntala, I couldn't tolerate this brutality, this bludgeoning of the weaker sections of the society by power crazy caste-conscious overloads."

Ramanand was visibly excited when Shibdas entered the room and delivered to him a letter sent by the Director of the Institute—Mr. W.M. McBride. Ramanand read the letter. The Director had expressed his deep sorrow at the attempted assassintation and wished him speedy recovery. He had also extolled Ramanand's services for the maintenance of communal harmony in an area close to Naulakha. Ramanand was deeply moved. "Shibdas Babu," he said, "but for your timely help I wouldn't have survived. May God bless you. And how can I thank this British Saheb who, although unrelated to me, had extended his best wishes for my recovery. We're definitely doing an act of great injustice by looking down upon every Englishman and branding him as enemy or anti-Indian. Not all Englishmen are bad and not all Indians are good."

"Mishraji," Shibdas said, "human mind is as complex as it is unfathomable. or else how could one find a logical explanation for the fact that a self-styled socialist leader called Bholua, who had basked in your sun-shine, who had received encouragement from you, whose movement was blessed by you, would overnight turn into a despicable demon and make an attempt, although abortive, on your life? Would any rational being support the brand of socialism which that scum of the earth—Bholua—seeks to propagate?"

Ramanand Mishra listened in silence. Then in a low voice he said: "Shibdas Babu I don't approve of the method or the policy of that man. Socialism is not a mantra that you or I would preach from house tops for others to rehearse. No. It's a much more serious thing. It's a way of life, which has to be imbibed, experienced and then patiently explained. You've to be a socialist in your way of thinking, in your outlook, and in your day-to-day actions. Only then you can lend credibility to your views. Views unsupported by action won't carry weight. This man, Bholua, is nothing but an agitationist. He's more interested in disrupting the existing social order than in reconstructing and consolidating. To Bholua and his tribe socialism is another name for opportunism. Annihilate the non-conformists and then become the undisputed leader of the ignorant masses. Such a specimen of a pseudo-socialist can be found in many a town and district. I'm sorry I couldn't judge him correctly earlier."

Suddenly Sudhakar burst into the room to announce the assemblage outside the house of a large number of people, not only from Mahmuda, but also from Dighra, Bhuskaul and Waini. They were mostly daily workers in the Naulakha, who had participated in the strike and raised slogans of "Naulakha Murdabad" at Bholua's bidding.

"What do they want?" Ramanand asked.

"They say they would like to have a *darshan* (view) of their benefactor."

"I'm not their benefactor. Let them go away."

"That they wouldn't," Sudhakar said. "Their leading spokesman, Rampreet, is here waiting on the verandah. Shall I call him?"

"Well, if he desires to see me, let him come," Ramanand said.

Sudhakar went out and soon came with Rampreet, who was Bholua's comrade-in-arms. Seeing Ramanand Mishra reclining on the bed with a bandage on his head, Rampreet fell down at his feet and said with a voice choked with emotion:

"Huzoor, we've come to beg your forgiveness. We're utterly misguided by the rascal Bholua. He gave us potfulls of *tari* and what we did was under the influence of that drink.

It's that Susal (socialist) leader from Muzaffarpur who vitiated the atmosphere and set the Paltaniyas and some of us against the Chipiatoli residents."

Ramanand pitied the poor fellow. Here was the specimen of a Waini villager. Simple and unsophisticated, content with little and shorn of any ambition. Freedom did not mean anything to him. Enough if he could get one full meal a day and could feed a mouth or two. But when aroused he became more fierce than the fiercest tiger. Honour he prized more than his life. Large-hearted and kind. But gullible. Could be misguided by a common trickster.

Ramanand asked Rampreet to stand and go back to his fellow-men and tell them that he did not harbour any ill-feeling towards them. It was enough if they did not allow themselves to be misguided by unscrupulous thugs like Bholua. If they loved him they should work united for the good of their village. Instead of saying "Naulakha Murdabad", they should say "Gandhiji Zindabad". "Bahrat mata Zindabad". Rampreet bowed down before Ramanand in deep reverence and made his exit. Outside the mass of villagers were suddenly electrified as Rampreet gave them the new slogans: "Gandhiji Zindabad, "Bharat Mata Zindabad". The large congregation cried in a full-throated voice "Bharat Mata Zindabad."

XXII

PRICKING THE BUBBLE

Thikedar Ramautar was in a quandary. His house in Mahmuda was burnt to ashes and with it was burnt the nagging sahukar, Chchoteylal. He wondered if anybody had an inkling about the fate of the Sahukar. But this much he knew that sooner or later tongues would wag and then there would be inquiries about the whereabouts of the sahukar. The arrest of the Susal (socialist) leader Bholua had further complicated matters. The role of Dudhia in the disruption of the strike would surely come to light. And chances were that Dudhia would break down during interrogation and implicate him. That would be a situation whose ramifications would be far-reaching. No only would he lose his face but his lucrative contract with the Naulakha authorities would be in jeopardy. And that would be a dismal finale to his ambitious career.

Ramautar had not seen Dudhia since the night before the Chipiatoli carnage. There was no trace of her. She must have perished in the flames, he thought. He did not feel sorry. Rather he was glad. Dudhia died so that Ramautar could live. A good deliverance indeed! Now not a trace of any evidence against him remained. Ramautar felt himself like a free bird. But that bloody sahukar? Perhaps some charred bones still remained in his burnt house. Ramautar got up with a start. Whenever an idea arose in his mind he always tried to give effect to it then and there. He was an impulsive person. Reasoning was not his forte.

Ramautar had purchased a new tum-tum and a horse to draw it. He lost no time to make a dash to his Mahmuda house, now a pile of burnt wood and bricks. Here and there some half-burnt doors and windows remained as mute testimony to his once ancestral place. Ramautar parked his tum-tum under a tree. The time was evening and nobody was around. He moved towards the charred building, and made his way to the place which was once his living room. He groped through the ashes under the light of a candle and began to collect what appeared to be remains of human bones in a jute sack.

Unknown to Ramautar a veiled feminine figure had entered the premises. She stood at some distance and watched the crawling figure of Ramautar. What on earth was he doing? And at this hour? Dudhia became inquisitive. She drew nearer. Then she watched Ramautar handling a piece of bone and dumping it into a jute bag. Fears, suspicions, horror simultaneously rocked Dudhia's mind. She shrieked. A startled Ramautar whirled back and stood aghast. There was before him in flesh and blood the very woman whose death he had devoutly wished.

"Dudhia? You're alive?" Ramautar gasped.

"Yes, alive to witness your notorious act."

"What d'ye mean? What act?"

"What's there in that sack? Whom have you killed and burnt?"

"Killed? I haven't killed anyone. The Paltaniyas have burnt my house. They must have thrown one or two *chamars* into the flames to burn along with the house. Do you approve of their action? The bloody swines.

Dudhia pretended to relent. She had more news to divulge than to receive. She would wait a little before pricking the bubble.

"What would you do with the bones?" she asked.

"Poor Harijans!", Ramautar said in mock sympathy. I must consign them to the Burhi-Gandak so that their souls may rest in peace."

"That you may do a little later. I've come to demand my price."

"Price?"

"You've forgotten so soon. I helped you to sabotage the Naulakha strike. You promised me something. Don't you remember?"

Ramautar was flabbergasted. Dudhia was out to blackmail him. A stratagem on his part was called for quickly.

"Yes, Dudhia. I remember perfectly. I don't forget anything." Ramautar reeled off the words with a tinge of pseudo-emotion. "I promised to give you a large sum of money if the strike ended in a fiasco."

"Only money? Nothing else?"

Ramautar eyed Dudhia intently and tried to fathom her mind. There was no trace of any emotion in her eyes.

"Look, Dudhia," he said, "my house's burnt. Or else I could have given you this *kothi* (house). But that doesn't matter. I've another house where you'll live with me like a..."

"Like a harlot? Isn't it?"

"I am surprised at the way you talk. Didn't I love you?"

"Love's with equals. You didn't love me. You exploited me. I was a fool to fall a prey to your blandishments. If you had loved me surely you wouldn't have asked me to undertake the hazardous task which I did.

And with result? My house was burnt. My brethren were butchered. My sisters were raped. And all the time I dreamt to repose in your arms in your *kothi*. All the waters of the Burhi-Gandak wouldn't wash my sins away."

Ramautar became desperate. "Forget about love and all that. Tell me how much you want."

"Five thousand rupees. I must build my house anew."

"Five thousand?" Ramautar gasped.

"Yes. And another five thousand rupees for saving you from the gallows. You killed Chchoteylal."

Ramautar turned white and speechless. He made a great effort to collect his wits. He must face the woman boldly here and now.

"I didn't kill him. Why should I?" he said.

"But you locked him in your living room by bolting the door from outside. I was fleeing from Chipiatoli. And on my way to the station I wanted to meet you. You're not at home. But I heard the shrieks of Chchoteylal. He was crying like a lost child. I had no time. I was a fugitive myself. Moreover I couldn't quite gather from which side of the house the shrieks came. I ran to Waini Station to catch the train to Samastipur. That same night the hooligans burnt your house. And in the flames poor Chchoteylal perished. I'm sure the bones you've collected in that sack are those of the ill-fated sahuakar. Am I wrong?"

Ramautar felt as if the earth was slipping under his feet. Somehow or other he balanced himself. He looked sad, a dejected man when he spoke. "Come on Dudhia. Take this five hundred rupees as advance money. Tomorrow you'll get the balance from Akhileswar. You've to go to his house."

"Akhileswar? That scum of the earth? That debauch? The fellow who knew only to defile and rape others' wives or dishonour poor unguarded girls in the neighbourhood? Why should I go to him? And do you think I am unmindful of the clandestine way he's collecting money from the labourers in collusion with you? I came to know the full facts from Shakuntala, while she escorted me to her house on that fateful night."

The bubble had burst. That was the last straw. Ramautar faced a situation which was too damnably desperate. Clouds began to whirl before his eyes. A great dark hole suddenly emerged from the bottom of the earth and seemed to engulf him. He gasped for air. He essayed to shout

but his vocal chords seemed to fail him. A strange shape floated before his eyes. That shape took a form which he seemed to recognise. That was the sadhu who had appeared in Mahmuda many many years back. The sadhu seemed to grin and say, "Those that live in sin will die in sin." Ramautar caught hold of a half-burnt door-frame and supported himself. Quickly he recovered and cast a hateful glance at Dudhia.

"Very well. You'll get your money. Tomorrow at six in the evening you meet me near the Burhi Gandak ferry."

Dudhia did not wait. She drew the veil on her face and departed.

Ramautar remained glued to the spot for some time and stared at the disappearing figure. "Tomorrow Dudhia you're going to meet your doom," he muttered and then took a sip from the bottle of liquor which he carried in his pocket.

*

Leaving Ramautar in his gutted house, Dudhia took a less-frequented foot-path which led through the acres of land thick with branching columns of palm trees, now enveloped in darkness, till she reached the *kacha* (unpaved) road to Chipiatoli. A ramschackle hut, which was occupied by a widow of her own *baradari* (community), gave temporary shelter to Dudhia, her own hut being completely burnt down by the Paltanias. Her heart ached as she witnessed the traces of the havoc wrought by the hooligans. The burnt-out hamlets, the maimed children, the roof-less rows of shops, the piles of rubble and the filth—all bore mute testimony to the wrath of the hooligans. And the thought that she herself was responsible for shaping the course of events was simply galling.

Why did she get involved with that unscrupulous Thikedar? Dudhia was stricken with remorse and alternating with remorse came anger—sudden spurt of anger which shook her mortal frame and caused her breasts to heave. That swine of the Thikedar should be taught the lesson of his life. She must expose his heinous deeds and the systematic exploitation of the farm hands in collusion with the lecherous Assistant Estate Manager of Naulakha—Akhileswar.

Dudhia pondered over the incidents of the afternoon as she lay on the bed. Her meeting with the Thikedar was like a revelation. She had observed the monstrosities of that man from close quarters. A guilty man as he was, Ramautar was shocked beyond measure, as if he had seen an apparition, when he had seen her near the half-burnt rubbles. And those pieces of bones, which he was dumping in the sack, told their own tale.

And finally the offer to pay the hush money was simply astounding. By her own reckoning ten thousand rupees was fabulous amount. And the Thikedar promised to pay the huge sum all in the course of one day. The whole thing was fishy. And why that uncanny hour of six and the Burhi Gandak ferry as the rendezvous? Perhaps the Thikedar wanted the whole thing to remain shrouded in secrecy. But a voice within her cautioned: "Dudhia beware". Dudhia kept on repeating "Beware, beware". It was like a refrain ringing in her ears as she lay on her cot in that dilapidated hut of her host.

As she woke up in the morning Dudhia made up her mind. She must seek the support of some one who would not be cowed down by the threats and fulminations of the Thikedar. But where could she find such a person? The men in her community were pretty useless. They knew how to lick the boots of their overlords and propitiate them by doing *begar*. And what did they get? A seer of rice and a *katia* of *tari*. Emasculated fools! When would they arise from their stupor and take up cudgels against all forms of injustices heaped upon them. If she had the power, Dudhia pondered, she would come out with a cane in her hand and whip the Harijans of Chipiatoli so that they could throw off the shackles of slavery and learn to live like a man. A revolution, a gigantic social revolution, was called for. And only a woman, cast in the mould of Goddess Durga, could usher in such a revolution. Dudhia was restless and impatient. Suddenly like a flash a thought arose in her mind. She would go to Mahmuda and seek the help of one who towered over all other men, who understood the pangs of destitute women, who gave shelter to the shelterless. Yes, she would go to Ramanand Mishra, the zemindar of Mahmuda.

When Dudhia reached Mahmuda village the afternoon sun was a blinking ball of fire. She had travelled the distance from Chipiatoli partly on foot and partly on a tum-tum. The roads were too rough and bumpy. Only the stretch of road from Waini to Mahmuda was good enough for tum-tum to negotiate. A tired Dudhia stopped at a well to slake thirst. It was a draw well. A rope was tied to a beam placed horizontally across the length of the well. A bucket lay suspended from the rope. This was the common well from which the village community had their potable water supply. Every man or woman had to bring his or her own water container and fill water from the bucket. Dudhia wondered whether she, a Harijan woman, could draw water from this well. The situation in Chipiatoli was different. They had their own well. The upper caste people never came to draw water from a well located in a Harijan bustee. Dudhia was extremely thirsty. She let the bucket go down to the bottom of the well. When the bucket was full she pulled the cord up. As she bent down to pour water from the bucket to her right palm raised to the mouth

a word of command to stop reached her ears. Looking up Dudhia observed a man of medium height with a bare chest displaying his sacred thread. The thread signified that the man was a Brahmin. His head was clean-shaven except for a tuft of hair behind the shining skull. It was obvious to Dudhia that she was standing before a venerable person.

"Bandagi Huzoor," Dudhia summed up courage to utter the words.

"You don't belong to this village. What's your caste?" the man thundered.

"I'm a Pasi. I come from Chipiatoli."

"A Harijan from Chipiatoli and you dared to defile the well," the Pundit growled. "Already you've defiled the bucket. Ram, Ram. What'll happen? *Anarth ho gaya*. (A great calamity has befallen)." Such a hue and cry was raised by the Brahmin Pundit, Jagdeep Pandey, that a sizeable crowd soon gathered. Egged on by onlookers the urchins pelted Dudhia with stones while the elders grinned at her predicament. Trying to elude the flying missiles Dudhia ducked and stumbled while getting up. However she did manage to stand but before she could scamper a stone hit her on her forehead and caused a gash wherefrom oozed the Harijan blood—if blood it was—to soil the mother earth. Seeing her collapse the urchins disappeared from the scenes but the elders stayed on. They followed a fleeing Dudhia like hungry wolves. A dazed and battered Dudhia dragged her weary feet to the house she knew too well.

Ramanand Mishra was away but Sumitra was at home. She was giving some instructions to Ratna, her adopted protegee, when she heard groans at the gate. Ramu was the first to notice the staggering feminine figure with a blood-soaked sari. He uttered a sharp cry which compelled Sumitra's attention. She hurried to the gate and held a tottering woman firmly by her hand.

"O my God! You're bleeding," Sumitra shrieked. She asked Ratna to get her some cotton dressing and iodine as she laid down the unknown woman on a wooden bench. Dudhia asked for some water but motioned to Sumitra not to touch her. In a feeble voice she said, "I'm a Harijan from Chipiatoli," Sumitra dressed her wounds and ignored her pleadings. She asked Ratna to bring water from the well. After Dudhia had slaked her thirst and felt a little better, she narrated her encounter with the villagers and prayed for a meeting with Mishraji.

"He's out but will come soon. Possibly you could wait," Sumitra said. But scarcely had she finished her sentence when the human hounds, scenting the smell of blood, gathered at the gate of Mishraji's home.

"Mataji, she's an *achhut* (untouchable). Drive her out." Sumitra faced the crowd and addressed the tufted Brahmin, who appeared to be the leader of the group.

"*Achhut*? Sumitra's eyes shone with unusual brilliance. There was fire in them. There was hatred in them. She blurted out: "You call her an outcaste? She's poor and defenceless. You've stoned her causing a grievous injury. Her fault? She wanted to have a drink from the village well. You call her an *achhut*? Was Ramchandrajai defiled when the *achhut keval* (boatman) washed his feet? Was Balmiki, whose Ramayana you read in the chaupal, less worthy of veneration because he was a *sudra*? Tell me Panditji, do you get defiled when you cross the Burhi-Gandak in a boat rowed by an *achhut majhi* (boatman). It's your mind which is dirty and defiled. Otherwise you wouldn't have acted in the manner you did. You may go now. Let Mishraji come and decide what should be done with this Harijan girl."

Suddenly the crowd dispersed. Knowing well the influence and reputation of Mishraji none dared to raise any voice of protest.

In the meanwhile Dudhia lay on the floor in a disconsolate mood. She refused to partake of any food offered to her. Purity of the house-hold was a matter she could not afford to contaminate. She was at the point of leaving the premises when Mishraji accompanied by Sudhakar stepped into the house. Seeing a woman seated on the steps with a blood-stained bandage on her head, he asked her who she was and what happened to her.

Dudhia stood up with folded hands and bowed her head in deep veneration.

"Huzoor, I'm Dudhia of Chipiatoli," she said.

"Dudhia? You're that woman who got mixed up with that blackguard of a contractor, Ramautar? You're that woman who incited your own brethren to break away from the pledge to stand united in that Naulakha strike? You're that dirty despicable woman who was the cause of that carnage which engulfed your own community, your sisters, you mothers, and which had brought me on the brink of death." Ramanand's eyes burnt with an unusual fire. Sumitra had never seen him so overwhelmingly upset, so wrathful. Seeing Ramanand trembling with rage Sumitra caught hold of him and made him sit down on a chair.

Dudhia looked down on the floor and said in a voice choked with emotion: "Have pity, Sir, on this poor misguided woman. I was a fool to

fall in the trap of that Thikedar. I came to you for help but I go away disappointed. My life's in danger. Today at six in the evening you'll either find my corpse near the Gandak ferry or you'll find the body of that banal Thikedar. I've already told Mataji about the circumstances concerning the death of the sahuakar Chchoteylal and the conspiracy hatched by the Thikedar in collusion with Akhileswar of Naulakha to suck the blood of the ignorant farm-hands. I'm going. I won't show my face again. My last bastion had fallen. My hope has been shattered."

Dudhia departed, an utterly disillusioned woman. The high priest of tolerance and social equality had let her down.

Sudhakar was as much distressed as his aunt, Sumitra, to find his uncle so utterly distraught. Never before had Ramanand displayed such choler, such excitement. Could it be because of the low caste of that woman? He, however, could not dare to ask any question. But Sumitra was of a sterner hue. She could face the wrath and indignation of her husband with complete equanimity. Some hidden power, unseen to ordinary mortals, had given her unbounded courage. She could love and hate, where hate was needed. After Ramanand had laid himself on a bed, visibly upset by the events, Sumitra asked: "You turned her away because she's a Harijan?"

"Harijan? I never repelled her because she's an *achchut*. When did I use that word? I hate her because she's no better than a harlot. I despise her because she's the killer of her own people."

"But you don't know that the Thikedar was a greater killer than she. He seduced her, promised her lots of money, and she, a poor woman, fell into his trap. Perhaps you don't know that Ramautar locked sahuakar in his room on the fateful day when the house was burnt down by the hooligans. Dudhia has told me everything."

Ramanand was stunned. "The brute," he muttered.

"At least you could have taken Dudhia to the Police Station to get her statement recorded. You know how afraid are the Harijans to go to a Police Station."

Ramanand was filled with a stinging remorse. He lay on his bed with eyes closed. A storm was brewing within his mind. If he had the power he would have incarcerated that trouble-shooter, Ramautar, or flogged him in the market-place. Blood-suckers all! Like leeches they flourished on the blood of the innocent and the famished farmers, who tilled others' lands. O horrible plight! He recalled the Psalm:

"As the fire burneth a wood and as the flame setteth the mountains on fire, so persecute them with thy tempest, and make them afraid with thy storm. Fill their faces with shame; that they may seek thy name, O Lord."

Perish. Let them perish—the tribe of dishonest traders, contractors and equally villainous tribe of Babus, who thronged the corridors of power. As he lay in deep distress Ramanand heard a sweet musical voice wafting to his ears. Sujata was reciting from the Ramayana: "O friend! Listen, I'm telling you my nature. This is known to Kak Bhusandi, Siva and Parvati. If a person, who is an enemy of this materialistic world comes to my shelter out of fear and forsakes pride, attachment, deceit, and various kinds of subterfuge, I immediately transform him in the likeness of a sadhu (saint), mother, father, brother, son, wife, body, wealth, house, friend and family." (*Sundar Kand*)

A baffled Ramanand began to pace through the length of the large spacious room. There was a tumult in his mind. He fought grimly to contain the upsurge of emotions. Sumitra sensed the feelings of her husband and knew that only Sujata could put the healing touch. She called Sujata to hasten to her father. With her characteristic fluency Sujata encompassed her father with her tender arms and looked up to his face convulsed with an indescribable pain.

"What's happened to you Babuji?" Sujata was almost on the verge of tears. Ramanand felt the deep touch, the warm affectionate embrace of his daughter. It was his own flesh and blood, so warm, so unbelievably soft, so fresh as the morning dew. Slowly the contortions in his face gave way to a faint smile. He looked down on the small dewy face of his daughter and imprinted a warm kiss on her radiant cheeks. "Darling," he said, would you recite the lines which you were reading. Sujata recited in a tremulous voice. "Sumitra! Sumitra!," an excited Ramanand looked at his wife and said: "Sujata has opened my eyes. I've committed a sin, an unpardonable sin. A woman, a Harijan woman as that, had come to me for shelter and I've turned her out. Let me make amends. Send for Rattan Majhi. I'm in God's hands."

"Babuji," Sujata said clinging to her father. "Why have you called Rattan? Are you planning a boat trip? Let me accompany you."

"Not today, darling," Ramanand said. Some other day I'll take you by boat to Waini ferry ghat."

Rattan Majhi came instantly to answer the summons of zemindar Saheb. He stood with folded hands to hear the command of his master.

"Rattan," Ramanand said, "tell me how much time it'll take you to reach Waini by boat."

"If we start at five," Rattan Majhi said. "we'll be there before six o'clock."

"All right. Get ready. There'll be three persons on the boat—myself, my nephew Sudhakar and yourself. Try to reach before six."

"I'll do my best." Rattan bowed before proceeding to the ghat to prepare the boat for zemindar Saheb's trip to Waini.

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After being rebuffed by Ramanand Mishra, Dudhia proceeded straight to Chipiatoli bazar and bought a knife with a good six-inch blade. That was to be her defence should in case the ravenous beast of a man, Thikedar Ramautar, pounced upon her. She knew the ways of men like the Thikedar. Flesh to them was more important than a morsel of bread. Then she proceeded to her temporary shelter, changed her dress, draped her body with a *chadar* (wrapper) and walked to the main road, to hail a tum-tum. She must reach Waini ferry by six o'clock. It was to be a momentous, albeit hazardous meeting.

Ramautar was already at the ferry ghat when Dudhia arrived. He carried a hand-bag which purported to contain the sum he promised to give to Dudhia. Seeing the approaching female figure Ramautar chuckled: "You're punctual Dudhia. Here's your money in this bag," he said with a disarming smile. Noticing a bandage on her head he queried: "What's that on your forehead?" "Nothing. I had a fall," Dudhia said as she advanced to collect the wallet.

"Wait, wait," Ramautar said. "This'll be our last meeting. Why shouldn't we have a last ride together, on the boat of course."

Dudhia hesitated. But finding no third person near at hand, and feeling secure because of the weapon which she carried in her bosom, Dudhia concurred. Together they got down to a medium-sized boat, which Ramautar had hired and kept for his momentous ride-out. Just as he was about to pull the oars a signal came from a man on the ferry ghat with a face hidden behind a maze of a huge head gear. Obviously he was watching the couple from a hide-out near the river front.

"Stop Ramautar." The man with the muffled face called out and within seconds he was in the water closing fast on the boat. Ramautar

pulled up for a minute and after the stranger clambered on to the boat, he made some hefty strokes and took the boat to deeper waters.

"Who are you?" an alarmed Dudhia shouted. The stranger removed his head-gear to reveal a countenance lit up with a fiendish leer. It was the face of Akhileswar, now dead-set for the final kill.

Dudhia shivered. She looked towards Ramautar, who did not betray any concern. In fact he looked utterly unmoved at the sudden intrusion of a person, who was hand in gloves with him in many an undertaking of a dubious nature.

"Turn the boat, Thikedar Sahib, or I'll jump into the water," shrieked Dudhia.

"Don't get upset, my bird. You're worth five thousand rupees," Akhileswar muttered as he slipped his hand around Dudhia's waist. Dudhia wriggled. Escape was impossible. The boat was rocking dangerously. She desperately sought to ward off the iron grip of the human hyena. Dudhia fidgeted nervously, furiously as Akhileswar pulled her nearer and nearer and sought to encompass her in a tight embrace. Instantaneously Dudhia bit the intruding hands with all the force she commanded. Akhileswar drew back his hand in pain and in the next moment he slapped her fully in the face. Dudhia was stunned for a moment or two. Then she steadied herself and in a flash drew out the open knife from out of the *chadar* and thrust it deep into the side of the approaching Akhileswar, now poised for a frontal attack. As the depredator reeled back with a groan, bleeding profusely from the wound inflicted by Dudhia's weapon, Ramautar took up the oar and slammed it hard on the woman's head with a force which made her fall with a thud. As all this happened with an incredible swiftness the boat quivered and veered towards the fatal course—the great whirlpool of Gorai Ghat.

The boat cut through the waters as Rattan Majhi pulled the oars with all the power that his muscles commanded. Ramanand and Sudhakar, seated on the planks in the middle of Rattan's boat, eyed anxiously as the wind and the current impeded their onward movement. Ramanand wondered whether they could cover the distance in an hour as Rattan had estimated. The Burhi Gandak had always been a baffling, frustrating stream. Only experienced boatmen knew about her twists and turns. Depths varied at different lengths of the river, and what was most disturbing and hazardous, was the under-water currents, the whirlpools. One such whirlpool existed near the Gorai Ghat and Rattan, an experienced

navigator as he was, was well aware of the death-pit. Anything caught by the whirlpool was destined to find a watery burial.

The boat slowed down as Rattan loosened his grip on the oars.

"What's the matter, Rattan?" Ramanand queried as he noticed the boat slowing down. "Huzoor! The boat's up against the current." Rattan Majhi said.

"Shall I help?". Sudhakar said looking at Rattan who was visibly fatigued.

"No, no. I'll be at it in a moment." Rattan took out a small circular tin-box from within the folds of his *dhoti*, the *chunauti* as it was called, and then from another fold of his loin cloth took out a piece of dried tobacco leaf and vigorously rubbed it with his right thumb on the palm of his left hand, adding a bit of lime. The resultant powder, *khaini* in popular parlance, was Rattan's *tour-de-force*. Flicking off the dust with a whiff of air from his mouth, Rattan inserted the powdered tobacco in his mouth, below the lower gum.

"Old habit, Huzoor! But it gives me energy," Rattan Majhi said as he took up the oars again.

Ramanand smiled. He was well aware of the habits of the poor, simple, unsophisticated fishermen. Their wants were few. They did not seek riches. They were content with a frugal meal. A little salt, a few morsels of *bhat* (rice) and a bit of smoked fish. That is all that they needed.

Sudhakar was watching Rattan Majhi pulling the oars with all the strength he could command. Sitting on the plank he could see, silhouetted against the western sky, a tall circular structure, which looked to be some sort of a giant bin.

"We're nearing the Waini jetty, Huzoor," Rattan Majhi said. "That's the Waini Water Tank."

Ramanand looked at his watch. It was nearing six. Sure enough the Waini ferry ghat loomed before him. A floating jetty glimmered in the afternoon sun. When the boat coasted, Ramanand and Sudhakar scrambled on the bank.

There was no trace of Dudhia. No trace of the Thikedar either. He looked worried. Did the woman give him an empty threat of self-

immolation? Sudhakar threw searching glances to locate the fugitive woman. But no feminine figure greeted his eyes.

Suddenly some one cried: "Mishraji, Mishraji". Ramanand looked up. Standing on the high bank was a lad of about thirteen, barefooted, clad in a short and shirt, with a shock of hair almost hiding his boyish handsome face.

"Well, Benu!" Ramanand accosted. "What're you doing here? Come down." "I'm watching the boat that's going to sink. It's nearing the whirlpool of Gorai Ghat".

"Which boat Benu?" Ramanand asked.

"The boat down there with three passengers on board."

"Who're they?"

"One's the Thikedar. He had come to our house once. Another is Akhileswar Babu of Naulakha. The third's a woman. I don't know her."

"That's Dudhia," Ramautar said to Sudhakar. "Let's follow. Well, Benu, would you like to come?" Benu nodded and then scrambled on the boat. He was awfully excited. Something was going to happen to the other boat. He saw in his mind's eye the picture of a rocking boat, going round and round.

"Follow that boat, Rattan," Ramanand shouted.

"Huzoor! The other boat is on a suicidal course. It's nearing the great whirlpool near the Gorai Ghat. My God!" Rattan Majhi cautiously steered his boat keeping his eyes on the other boat, which appeared to be a tiny fleck on the bosom of the Burhi Gandak. Suddenly a ghastly sight greeted the passengers of Rattan Majhi's boat. The other boat, some hundred yards away, turned and twisted, moved in circles and then plunged into a great cauldron of churning waters, sucked, as it were, by some unknown elemental force.

"The boat's sunk, Huzoor," Rattan Majhi shouted. "All are drowned."

Benu shrieked and then hid his face in Ramanand Mishra's lap.

"Turn the boat towards Waini ferry," a grief-stricken Ramanand commanded.

When Ramanand and Sudhakar reached the house of Shibdas Banerjee along with a dazed Benu, it was nearing eight o' clock. The kerosene lamp showed some anxious figures crouching in the living room. Shibdas

was surprised to see Benu in the company of the zemindar of Mahmuda. Before he could open his lips Ramanand said;

“It’s no fault of Benu that he’s late. I saw him in the Waini ferry ghat standing alone.” Then Ramanand recounted the circumstances relating to his boat-ride to Waini and how Benu had pointed to the boat which was going to sink. His prognostication proved to be hundred per cent correct. Well, while going back home I’ll inform the police about the boat tragedy.”

XXIII

CHANGING PATTERNS

Biren Babu's mess near the Cooperative Store was agog with excitement. Biru Babu was holding, as usual, his evening gossip court. The visitors that evening were Radharaman, Nibaran, Bansi and Parmeswar, all Babus working in different departments of Naulakha.

"I knew this would happen and this has happened," Biru Dada silenced his visitors with an enigmatic prelude to his story. "What's happened?" queried the quartet almost in unison. Biru Dada took a pinch of snuff and thrust it into the nostrils and said with an unusual seriousness, "Foto Babu has become *pa-gol*. You know what *pa-gol* means? Mad. He's become stark mad. I'm informed that he's been taken to Ranchi Mental Hospital by his brother-in-law. Foto Babu was reluctant to go but his wife had him sent. "But how? He's quite normal the other day. All of a sudden he goes mad? Surely there must have been a shock," piped in Radharaman Babu who was a student of psychology in his college days. He had read about the nexus between stresses and mental imbalances. One shock could lead on to insanity and another shock could restore sanity, depending upon the nature of the shock. But it worked differently with different persons.

Biren Babu was hardly the person to be cornered by Radharaman's psychological expositions. "Let me explain," Biru Dada began. "I wouldn't like to be quoted. I'm stating what I've heard. Foto Babu, as you know, was addicted to *tari*. Every evening, after his office hours, he used to visit an unlicensed toddy-shop in Waini Bazar. One day that shop was suddenly closed and the toddy-seller, who was a woman with charming features, vanished. People say that so great was his thirst that Foto Babu went on his cycle to Samastipur, a good twelve miles, to slake his thirst. In the process he got completely bottled up."

"You mean the drink made him mad?" Bansi Babu expressed his disbelief. Biru Dada raised his hand. "Wait, wait. Let me finish. When Foto Babu returned that night, greatly intoxicated, he found the door of his house bolted from inside. This was as it should be, for, his young wife stayed alone. Without knocking at the door, Foto Babu went to the window. The curtain was not properly drawn from inside. He peered into the room through the window glass and what he saw, despite the prevailing darkness, was completely, utterly unbelievable."

"What did he see?. The Babus could hardly contain their curiosity. But Biru Babu was a gossip-master *par excellence*. He knew the art of

keeping his listeners in suspense. He always unscrewed the bottle in slow measure and let the gas escape in bits. "Wait, wait," he commanded. "Foto Babu was taking the topmost snap of his life. Only the focus was rather dim. The light inside was too insufficient to take a brighter image." There was all round uneasiness now. Suddenly Biru Dada clicked the shutters. "Peering through the window Foto Babu discovered his wife in the firm embrace of a lanky youngman. His intoxication had gone. Sanity had returned and with it also emerged an uncontrollable urge to capture and annihilate the usurper of his home and happiness. With a tremendous burst of energy he kicked at the ramshackle door which gave way instantly. In the staggering darkness he espied a man's figure jumping over the courtyard wall and vanishing into the clump of bamboo trees that overshadowed the graveyard. What followed was more interesting. As Foto Babu advanced towards the bed to grab his wife by the hair and teach her the lesson of her life, something hard and strong struck him on his forehead and sent him reeling down on the floor. Then a hue and cry followed. Neighbours converged on Foto Babu's quarter where the weeping housewife narrated how a daring dacoit had burst into the room after breaking open the front door, belaboured her husband with a hammer and jumped over the walls on an alarm being raised. Thank God, nothing was lost except Foto Babu's senses.

Since that night Foto Babu was behaving in an abnormal manner and had taken leave from office to nurse his wounds. But the disease was more mental than physical. Foto Babu was, most reluctantly, whisked off to Ranchi.

"Who told you this cock-and-bull story?" Nibaran Babu thrust a salvo.

"H'm. I've heard this from the horse's mouth," Biru Babu said with his usual composure. "Foto babu confided to me and... and the intruder was no other than Akhileswar."

The audience was stunned to silence. Before the Babus could recover from the shock of their lives, Shibdas burst into the room and announced: Akhileswar is dead. Drowned in the Burhi Gandak. And Foto Babu's wife has hung herself to death."

Strange gory figures danced on the walls. The light from the hurricane lamps cast strange shadows as one by one the Babus trooped away.

Pursuant to the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Agriculture (1926) a body known as Imperial Council of Agricultural Research was set up in 1929 with head-quarters at New Delhi.

The Babus of Naulakha viewed the goings-on with complete indifference. The changes in the top hierarchy meant nothing to them. There was no accretion to their incomes. Only a few top scientists gained as they bagged the coveted posts of Agricultural and Animal Husbandry Commissioners in I.C.A.R. But one lucky chap was Biru Dada.

At one of his evening *addas* (get-togethers) Biru Dada surprisingly produced delicacies of various sorts to satisfy different tastes. There were the Bengali *rasogollas*, the Madras *dosa*, the Punjabi *pakorās* and Bihari *moong ki ladoos*. "What's the matter?", the husky Harinam Singh asked with waxing eyeballs. "Are you getting married, Dada?," queried Ambica Babu. Ekambaran Babu eyed the *dosas* with delight and looked at Dada's face with wonder. Even Shibdas could not help expressing a real surprise when he surveyed the spongy *rasogollas* displayed on the kitchen table. "Come out Biru Dada," he asked, "what's the occasion for this feast?" Biru Babu did not disappoint. "Well, friends. This is a farewell function. I'm going to Delhi to join the I.C.A.R as steno to the Secretary. Thanks for your company and thanks for the many interesting nights of gay gossipings." A sadness crept over the assemblage as each person affectionately hugged Biren Babu before making the exit.

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Keeping in view the new climate generated by Gandhi-Irwin parleys and possibly on account of lack of substance in the charges framed against them, the then Government of Bihar withdrew the cases pending against Babus Ramanand Mishra and Viswanath Prasad. When news of the withdrawal of cases reached Ramanand Mishra he was not un-usually exalted. "Lord Ram has vindicated my honour," he said to Sumitra. "He in his infinite mercy has given me a new lease of honourable life to be devoted to public good."

The seasonal rains had given a new lustre to the countryside. The paddy fields were lush green. A glimmer of hope shone in the eyes of the peasants. "Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness," Ramanand Mishra mused as he surveyed Nature's bounty. Mahmuda, why Mahmuda alone, Waini and all the peripheral villages would this year reap a bumper harvest. No more exploitation by the *sahukar*. No more exploitation by the crafty Thikedar. Food for all. Bliss for all. *Sarve atra sukhinah bhavantu*. May all beings on earth be happy. Om Shanti, Om Shanti, Om Shanti.

Let there be peace, peace, peace. The words sounded like a refrain in the ears of Ramanand Mishra as he proceeded towards Bhuskual to meet his ailing friend, Viswanath Prasad.

Things had gone awry in Babu Viswanath Prasad's household. There were persistent pleadings from his sister-in-law at Muzaffarpur to give away his daughter Shakuntala in marriage. A groom had been found and all that was required was Shakuntala's consent. Kampta's marriage was also overdue. He refused to enter into wedlock until his sister's marriage was performed. Babu Viswanath Prasad was in a quandary. What should he do? Everytime he broached the subject with his daughter she shrugged her head. "Don't worry about my marriage," that is all she said. "Have you any particular choice?" Viswanath Prasad asked her one day. There was no response from Shakuntala.

Lately Viswanath Babu thought of a likeable groom for his daughter. Sudhakar. He was no doubt a Brahmin by caste but he knew for certain that Sudhakar was as liberal as his uncle, Ramanand. If Ramanand agreed, perhaps Sudhakar would not refuse. A period of prolonged mental worries had unsettled Viswanath Prasad. His years, he felt, were hastening away like the dried leaves of autumn. There was none to comfort or console. An obdurate daughter was to him a painful burden. How he wished his wife were alive.

As he lay on bed to brood over his predicament, Ramanand Mishra called on him. "What's happened to you?" Ramanand asked as he looked at the pale and haggard face of his friend. "Father eats little and worries a lot," Shakuntala said.

"About what?"

"About my marriage."

"That's but natural, daughter," Ramanand said. "Every father wants to see her daughter nicely settled in life. But Viswanath Babu, you must have some medical aid too. I'll send Sudhakar. He'll fix up with a doctor. And Shakuntala, you must be having a trying time nursing your ailing father. I'll send Ratna to assist you." Babu Viswanath Prasad pressed the hands of Ramanand Mishra in gratefulness.

Sudhakar called a physician to examine Babu Vishwanath Prasad. His ailment was diagnosed as bronchial pneumonia. Shakuntala perceived a twinge of remorse as his father lay on bed down with fever. She was the cause of her father's worries. And the worries had snapped the strength of the patient. He was now ill, gravely ill. Shakuntala watched Sudhakar attend to her father like an expert nurse. He brought the medicines; he

applied the anti-inflammation bandage in his chest; he sat by his bed-side, and talked about the political developments in the country. How happy her father was when Sudhakar remained with him. Shakuntala looked at the sun-tanned masculine frame of Sudhakar. She was impressed. There was future for the country, she thought, when self-less youngmen like Sudhakar walked across the land. Just like Sumanta. Both were young and active but they furrowed different fields. One was fired by a revolutionary zeal and another by an idealism generated by the saint of Sabarmati—Mahatma Gandhi. When not attending on her father, Shakuntala engaged herself in conversation with Ratna, who was now sharing with her the house-keeping work. Somehow Ratna had endeared herself to her. Shakuntala felt a strange sort of kinship with Ratna, although she was not related to her. One day Ratna told Shakuntala that she had a mother for whom she felt a serious concern. She did not know her whereabouts since she left Benaras.

"Benaras?" Shakuntala looked up with a start.

"Yes. I lived there with my brother and mother."

"Who's your brother?" Shakuntala gazed at Ratna's face with a heart thumping with excitement.

"My brother's name is Sumant. But he deserted us one day. We haven't heard from him since then."

Shakuntala felt as if the ground was slipping under feet. She grabbed Ratna's hands to steady herself and then feebly asked: "Did your brother study at Patna College?"

"Yes, he did. He was a topper. Mother expected much from him after our father's death but her dreams were shattered. One day he left us in the custody of a distant uncle and disappeared. You know the circumstances in which I was brought to Dighra." Shakuntala at that time felt an uncanny sense of shame. Shame because she had loved one who had deserted his own mother and sister. Left to the wolves, as it were. Sumant was a coward, a fugitive. But then she remembered the parting words of Sumant: "I won't take to violence. I'll come back to you when my mission is over." Shakuntala wiped off her tears which came rushing to her eyes.

"You've nursed me to health," Babu Viswanath Prasad said to Sudhakar one day. "And you must nurse the villagers. They're suffering from a terrible disease."

"What's that"

"Ignorance. Ignorance is a disease, Sudhakar. They don't know what's good for them, what's right for them. They must be taught. They must be made literate. Once they are lettered, they'll try to think rationally. They'll realise that personal hygiene is essential if diseases like cholera and small-pox are to be eradicated. They'll realise that usury is bad; that casteism is a curse; that giving and asking a dowry is a sin and that freedom is not a fruit to be plucked, but to be fought for, not by divisive action but by united efforts. We must rally behind our leaders. Sudhakar smiled. "You're asking me to perform too great a task. This village is not mine alone. Half the inhabitants are women. The lead must come from some one among them." You are right Sudhakar," Babu Viswanath Prasad said and looked at Shakuntala, who was as attentive as Sudhakar himself. "Yes", he said, "the lead must come from women. Well, there must be a women's volunteer corp. Let Shakuntala take the lead. Of course, Sumitra Devi would be the friend, philosopher and guide, and my friend, Ramanand, would be too willing to help. The idea of opening literacy centres was his."

"I'll have Ratna to work with me. She's intelligent, respectable and educated."

"How do you know?" Sudhakar asked.

"I didn't know myself. Only yesterday she's told me about her past. You'll be surprised to know that Ratna is the sister of your one-time college pal, Sumant Verma.

"Sumant!" Sudhakar gasped in wonder.

"Yes Sumant. I was as much surprised as you're today," Shakuntala said. She deliberately suppressed the fact of her intimacy with Sumant.

"Truth is stranger than fiction," Babu Viswanath Prasad commented as Sudhakar took leave and left for Mahmuda.

*

For years Ramanand Mishra had been trying to set up a charitable hospital in Mahmuda. The hospital in Naulakha was primarily for the campus residents but emergent cases from neighbouring villages were also admitted. But the demand for admission was so great during monsoon and post-monsoon months that the Naulakha hospital had perforce to turn away patients. That was the period when quacks, ill-trained *hakims* and *vaid*s (followers of indigenous systems of medicine) exploited the villagers and filled their own coffers. Anyone who paraded

stethoscope or displayed an array of assorted herbal medicines in glass jars was looked upon with veneration. "Dagdar Saab" (Doctor Saheb) was next to God—an object of adoration and adulation.

*

Passing through the cobbled lanes of Mahmuda, Ramanand stopped before Rajju Sah's *kothi* (house). Rajju Sah was affluent. He had several *golas* (stock-houses) near Saraiyaganj bazar in Muzaffarpur with plentiful stocks of cereals and pulses but his ideas were as antiquated as his two-storeyed *kothi*. Who could say that Rajju Sah, wearing a vest and an under-sized *dhoti* (wearing apparel), was a man of lakhs? Accumulation rather than ostentation was the motto of Rajju Sah's life. "Live frugally, eat simply, dress poorly, and talk nicely"—these were the lessons that were imparted to him by his late father, who was a pedlar of sorts in Kalyani bazar. But one lesson that Rajju Sah never learnt was the gainful use of money. With no son or daughter, Rajju Sah had adopted a sister's son as his own. The adopted son, as was the habit of all upstarts and rags-to-riches youths, squandered money on undesirable pursuits and caused so much tension to the old man that he was now completely bed-ridden. Apprehending that the end was not far away, Rajju Sah had sent a note to Ramanand Mishra requesting him to meet him. And that was the reason why zemindar Ramanand Mishra had walked the distance from his residence to Rajju Sah's house, a nice gesture on his part towards an elderly resident of Mahmuda.

A flight of narrow stairs led him to the central room in the upper floor. On a six feet by three feet cot lay Rajju Sah, an emaciated old man with none to help him except a hired hand, his wife having pre-deceased him. On a circular wooden table lay a few bottles, obviously some medicines dispensed by the village *vaid*. A chair with a broken arm lay by his bed-side. At one corner of the room there was an earthen water pitcher with a glass on top.

"Ram, Ram, Sahji," Ramanand Mishra did the usual courtesies as he was ushered into the patient's room. He wondered what could be the reason for this unusual summons.

"Ram, Ram Mishraji. I'm greatly overwhelmed by your presence. May God bless you." Rajju Sah folded his hands and made a move to sit but Ramanand Mishra made him lie on the bed. "You're rather ill. Who's treating you," Ramanand asked.

"Bansi dagdar."

"Bansi? He's not a doctor; he hasn't any degree, not even a diploma. I don't think he ever entered any Medical College or school". "I don't know," Rajju Shah said, "There's a sign board outside his house and he wears a rubber strapping round his neck."

"That's the stethoscope. It's to give the impression that he's a doctor. How long are you ill?"

"Four months. But no doctor can cure me, Mishraji. I'm a broken man, physically and mentally. I've earned a lot but to what purpose? All my good money is going down the drain. May be I'm atoning for the sin of amassing money and not spending them for public good." Rajju Sah was visibly tired as he uttered these words.

Ramanand felt embarrassed. He looked at the pale and withered face of the dessicated old man, who deprived himself of all the pleasures of life to earn and accumulate money, which now to him was a trash or a tinsel. Of what use? To what purpose? The words of Rajju Sah kept reverberating in his ears.

After resting for a while Rajju Sah groped for something under his pillow with his feeble hands. He found the object—a roll enclosed in a red satin.

"Mishraji, here's my will. I've bequeathed my life's savings—two lakhs of rupees to you for the construction of a hospital. There's nothing for my adopted son except the *golas*, which he's already got in Muzaffarpur. That'll support him comfortably."

Ramanand Mishra was stunned. He had no words to utter. He sat speechless for some moments. Then he opened his mouth.

"Sahji, I appreciate your sentiments. But I can't accept the gift." "Why?" Rajju Sah's eyes blinked. There was a tinge of sadness in his face.

"I've already made arrangements for the construction of a hospital in Mahmuda." I've made a donation of land to Government and I'm expecting a grant. Land having been gifted, the building won't take long to come up."

"That's a noble gesture, Mishraji. You're a worthy son of Mahmuda. Why Mahmuda alone? Of Waini, of Tirhut, nay, of the entire province. May god bless your efforts. But my offer is for another cause." Rajju Shah was visibly exhausted.

"What's that?" Ramanand asked.

"My hospital won't be of general type. The money would have to be spent on a different type of institution. It would be an institution to treat T.B. patients, an institution to find the causes and cures of this dreaded disease. You know Mishraji, my wife died of Tuberculosis."

Ramanand was taken aback. Here was a simple unsophisticated villager who was miles away from Calcutta or Patna, where his wife might have received prolonged treatment. Rajju Sah must have suffered as much mental agony as his afflicted consort and had eventually accepted the stark truth that the disease was beyond cure. It was a point of no return in so far as medical science was concerned. Here was a man, Ramanand thought, who never learnt to utilise his wealth during his active years. Now at the fag end of his life he had learnt the supreme lesson that God in His infinite kindness gave wealth to some to be spent in public good, to alleviate sufferings, to combat diseases, and to render succour to the needy.

"Sahji," Ramanand said in a deep emotional voice, "God has given you plenty. I'm overwhelmed by your offer. But why entrust this will to me?"

"Because there's not a more honest man in this village of ours. Please don't say no!"

"I accept your offer. But one thing I would like to tell you. Waini isn't the proper place for a hospital or a sanatorium for T.B. patients. Such hospitals are set up in cool places, preferably in higher altitudes. There's an institution in Ranchi, which admits T.B. patients in their sanatorium. If you agree I'll send the money to them. They'll accept with gratitude and perhaps they may be able to set up a research unit there."

"Yes, yes. Do that by all means. I feel very happy."

Let me not bother you with more talking. I'll summon a competent doctor who'll treat you right now," Ramanand said.

"That I think will be unnecessary." Rajju Sah's eyes shone with an unusual brilliance as Ramanand took leave with Rajju Sah's will.

Despite the best medical treatment provided by Ramanand Mishra, Rajju Shah did not survive long. His adopted son, Suresh Sah, came to know about the bequeathment made to the zemindar of Mahmuda by Rajju Shah. A legal battle with the zemindar was unthinkable. Suresh Sah did not know what to do to retrieve the will. He paced up and down the central room and in a moment of anger and utter frustration kicked the earthen pitcher and sent it rolling across the room with water spilling in all directions.

XXIV

TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS

An unprecedented excitement gripped the Naulakha township. Regiments of the Bihar Light Infantry, mounted on spruced-up horses, trooped past the Babu quarters, where through half-opened windows peered the house-wives who rarely came out during the day in the presence of male members of the society. With sabres tucked to their bright-red tunics and high boots and helmets, the cavalry regiment presented a pageant of glorious colour. Perched on the *tagar* tree in his compound, Benu observed the columns thunder past. Hundreds of horses trotted on the road raising a dense pall of dust all along the route to the Polo Ground. The cavalry columns skirted the students' hostel and the silent cemetery adjoining the *Bans Jhaar* and jugged on through the Hospital Road, which led to the Dairy touching the spacious Polo field. Exercises of various sorts were performed on the grassy lawns, such as jumping over wooden bars, bayoneting of stuffed gunnies, fencing and mock-duelling.

A big sprawling banyan tree close to the polo ground provided a good enough vantage point for urchins who craned their necks to get a glimpse of the grand spectacle. A thing such as this was unthinkable in Waini. The talk of the township was the presence of the *gora sipahis* (white soldiers) who encamped on the College ground adjacent to the Naulakha. Where was the need, the residents wondered, for this unusual pomp and show, this brazen display of military might in a sleepy little township far from the urban areas of the country. Waini was free from political turmoil. The people here were His Majesty's loyal servants. Here no slogan like "Inquilab Zindabad" was raised. Here there were no *morchas* (rallies), no picketings. Whatever commotion was there was well outside the Naulakha campus—in Waini Bazar, in Mahmuda or in distant Muzaffarpur.

But the truth was soon out. A circular from the Director's office reached the desk of each Divisional Head. The Viceroy, the circular said, was visiting the Institute before laying down the reins of office. The Departmental Heads should engage themselves in a clean-up campaign and present a picture of efficiency and neatness. All subordinates should be asked to be punctual in attendance and dress themselves properly for the occasion. Every Babu must purchase a medallion priced at annas eight to be issued by the Director's office to commemorate the visit. There were murmurs in the Babu quarters about the compulsory purchase of the medallion. Wasn't this a levy? The clarification came from Ram Pratap Babu. "Arey Bhai," he said to his colleagues, "the medal is your

passport to office. Times are bad, brother. Lat Saheb's visit is no ordinary matter. Hundred per cent security is required. Haven't you noticed the *gora sipahis* parading on the Naulakha roads.

The new Thikedar, Rewati Reman, was ordered by the Burra Saheb to give a face-lift to the buildings. For days hundreds of labourers sweated to white-wash the quarters, repair the roads and prune the hedges. Entry of outsiders to the Naulakha campus was severely restricted. And a strict vigil was kept all along the road girdling the Burhi Gandak. Every person crossing the Burhi Gandak by boat was searched. A panic gripped the vendors and pedlars to such an extent that they stopped visiting the Naulakha campus.

*

Benu's school was agog the activities. All the boy-scouts, including Benu, were made to drill in the hot sun clad in their khaki shirts and shorts.

"Left. Right. Left," shouted the scout master as the phalanx of scouts marched up and down the school playground with staff on their shoulders.

"Halt," came the command. The group stamped their feet on the ground and halted.

"Fall in twos." The group divided into two rows and faced each other.

"Salute." Up went the staff in the hand of each scout as he faced his opposite number. An arch, big enough for the Viceregal car to pass through, appeared overhead.

"Fall in line," shouted the scout-master. The two rows were merged into one.

"March," came another command. The single file of scouts marched on as the mid-day sun sent down scorching rays. They marched on with parched tongues, burning eyes, aching limbs. A good one-mile march to the post-office became a routine. Then one day the Head Master announced: "Boys, the Viceroy is visiting Naulakha. His motorcade will proceed *via* the Post Office road; you'll have to give a fitting reception. And mind you don't forget to sing 'God Save the King.'"

*

Voluntary social service is a high-sounding word but it has its

pit-falls. An urbanite like Sudhakar never dreamt that he would have to receive bricks and not bouquets. With Shakuntala and Ratna, Sudhakar moved from house to house, hamlet to hamlet, meeting men and women, young and old. While Sudhakar met the men-folk, Shakuntala and Ratna addressed the women-folk. The idea of an adult literacy centre was something incomprehensible to the villagers. "What? Learning the alphabets now?" Ramdasia expressed her sense of horror as Shakuntala explained to her the objectives. "Better teach the boys and open a school for them," Vindhyabasini Devi, an elderly lady, whose husband was a trader in Waini, flatly flung the words at Shakuntala's face. "I think she's right," Ratna said. "When there's no school for boys and girls in Mahmuda, where would they go? There's no motivation."

That day Sudhakar explained the difficulties of his mission to Ramanand Mishra. "Don't be downcast, Sudhakar," Ramanand said. "Every good project is beset with difficulties in the initial stages. I agree that there's no school for the village children. We'll open a kindergarten school for boys and girls. Shakuntala and Ratna would have to take charge. And Sudhakar, you'll have to enlist the support of the local youngmen to procure students. Don't despair if the response is poor in the initial stages." Sumitra Devi was listening to the discussion. She realised that both Sudhakar and her husband were going off the rails. Instead of adult literacy they're talking of children's education, which of course, was the basic need of an egalitarian society. She intervened as Ramanand was going to deliver some more home-truths to Sudhakar.

"Excuse my intervention," Sumitra Devi said, "we seem to have lost the main point. The question is of educating the adults. But how? Not by teaching the alphabets, which in any case they won't feel enthused to learn after a hard day's work in the fields. Education can be imparted in a variety of ways. You call the villagers to the chaupal to listen to Ramayana recitation and they'll flock in numbers. Religion is a deep abiding force. There after the mass meeting, before or after the recitation, tell them the benefits of cleanliness and personal hygiene, the advantages of inoculation and vaccination, the evils of drinking, the imperative need of fellow-feeling, brother-hood and communal harmony; explain to them the evils of untouchability and the advantages of education. As to the education of little boys and girls upto the age of seven, you'll have to provide free teaching, supply them reading and writing materials, and provide, as Ratna said to me the other day, motivation. Things won't move without motivation. A farm-hand wouldn't care to work for longer hours unless he's paid something extra. Go and see how some landlords extract more work by providing extra wages as a motivation. A Babu

wouldn't sit for an hour extra in office unless the motivation of overtime allowance is there. As years roll on, you'll find this motivation in every sphere—in agriculture, in industry, in education, in family welfare. Village children and poor children as that, wouldn't be sent to schools unless there's the lure of free food in the school premises."

"I agree with you, Sumitra Devi," Shakuntala said. "Free supply of food is a powerful motivation. Sudhakar Babu will bear me out how Jagannath Mistry told us in our face: 'We don't want to learn alphabets. We want food.' "In a situation like this it's extremely difficult to enthuse the villagers."

Ramanand Mishra readily endorsed the idea of kindergarten class for village urchins, both boys and girls. He further assured that every pupil attending the class would be provided with a slate and pencil and an alphabet book. Besides, each pupil would be provided with free milk. "Sumitra," said Ramanand, "you'll have to address the villagers, men and women, during the course of Ramayana *Path* (recitation)."

*

News that a free teaching institution had been set up in Mahmuda by zemindar Ramanand Mishra in one of his farm houses was received coldly at first. Initially only two pupils attended the class where Ratna was the only teacher. Then some more were induced to attend. Matresses were provided on the floor. Outside the class room sat Ramu, the domestic aide of Ramanand. He struck the bell at the hour of ten. The bell was struck again after an hour to signify the short break. During this period a can of milk was brought by Ramjiwan. Shakuntala supervised the distribution of milk to the pupils. Somehow Shakuntala felt a sort of elation which she had never felt before. She remembered the parting words of Sumant: "Try to serve your village." What better service could there be, Shakuntala thought, than of nursing and feeding the famished children, the future citizens of the country in bondage? And Sudhakar? She marvelled at the way he moved bare-footed from door to door advising people to get themselves vaccinated, to keep their premises clean, to burn the garbage, and to make use of the hospital facilities at Waini instead of spending money on the village quacks. "God knows whether they believed him," Shakuntala wondered.

But the gathering at the village chaupal to listen to recitation from the Ramayana was impressive. About hundred men and women sat in front of the dias- men on one side and women on the other. Purdah system was virtually unknown in villages. At the most women drew their *ghunghat* (veil) a little lower down the head.

Sumitra Devi spoke of Panchvati where Ram, Sita and Lakshman had built their ashram (hermitage) during their *Vanabas* (sojourn in forest). A beautiful Nature had made the place a veritable paradise. There were gay, sprightly flowers everywhere. How clean were the surroundings! The spotted deer untroubled by any lurking fear moved about freely among the bushes and nimbled at the soft succulent leaves. Well, who wouldn't like to live in Panchvati *vana* (forest). It was a paradise on earth. It became so because Lord Ram had himself stayed in Panchvati. Should we not, Sumitra asked, try to convert our Mahmuda into a Panchvati. Here there would be no enemies, no quarrels between a brother and brother; there would be only love and purity. "Let's forget our petty rivalries, jealousies and bickerings, and build a new Mahmuda. There wouldn't be any distinction between the rich and the poor, between one class of people and another," Sumitra Devi said. "Jai Mataji" cries rent the air as she concluded her speech.

*

Shakuntala was feeling a void the like of which she had never experienced before. The more she saw the thin brooding face of her father, the more worried she became. She knew the canker which was eating into the vitals but how could she relieve it? How could she tell him that she was in love with a young *satyagrahi* who had promised to return after his mission was over. To get over the gnawing cares of her heart, Shakuntala took Ratna into confidence. She hugged Ratna as she related her tale of woe and wept. Ratna too wept because of the almost unbearable predicament of Shakuntala, who could be her *bhouji* (sister-in-law) as and when Sumant returned. "Let's offer prayers to Goddess Kali," suggested Ratna. "She'll surely listen to your prayers." They decided to visit the Kali Mata temple in Dighra on the next *Amabas* (New Moon) considered to be an auspicious day.

*

More and more students started coming to Ratna's kindergarten class. Shakuntala acted as the secretary and looked after the requirements of the children. One day after the recess Sudhakar dropped in with a big bundle on his shoulders. He was visibly tired. There were drops of perspiration on his handsome face. Shakuntala felt an almost irresistible urge to wipe off his sweat with her own handkerchief but muted the feeling. This could be misconstrued. Instead she asked Sudhakar to sit down on a chair and began to fan him. "Don't worry," Sudhakar said. "I had been to Muzaffarpur on a mission of mercy. I've been cycling for two hours.

"What was that mission?" Shakuntala asked. "The Mission in Muzaaffarpur wanted my help for relief work," Sudhakar said.

"Relief work?"

"Yes. To distribute food and medicines to the patients. You know small-pox has broken out in a virulent form in Damuchak area there. Swamiji is well-known to uncle and he wanted some volunteers."

"So Mishraji sent you?"

"No, I myself volunteered. By the way where's Ratna?"

"She's taking her class. But first tell me if you've taken vaccination."

Sudhakar laughed.

"I admire your concern for others. But have you immunized yourself?"

"No." Shakuntala said. "Women don't die easily, Sudhakar Babu." Sudhakar didn't fail to notice a creeping sadness in Shakuntala's face. Here was a woman—brilliant, educated, kind-hearted—who had given up a life of comfort and taken up almost the life of a recluse, going from door to door to light the lamp of knowledge and to dispel the darkness of ignorance. Something surely weighed heavily on her mind, and that's why she looked so sad, so detached.

"Shakuntala Devi," Sudhakar said, "the more I see you, the more I wonder. Don't you feel tired? Don't you feel the need of a little rest, the need for some.."

Shakuntala did not allow Sudhakar to complete the sentence. "Thanks for your concern. But tell me what do you have in the bundle of yours?"

Sudhakar was taken aback. He could feel the shadows in the depths of Shakuntala's eyes. Shakuntala was brushing aside the topic deliberately or perhaps she was combating a surging emotion in her heart by a wilful diversion. Ratna entered the room as Sudhakar unfastened the bundle. There were fifty pairs of shirts and pencils. Among other things, there were a set of photographs of national leaders and three pieces of *khadi-made* saris.

"Oh, dear! What a heavy merchandise," Ratna expressed her surprise.

"I could understand the children's apparel. But the saris? You aren't married if I'm not mistaken." Shakuntala laughed. Sudhakar shared in the laughter.

"Don't think I had to expend money on them. They're the gifts to me for the labour of love. There's no lack of donors, Shakuntala Devi, for a good cause. Since I refused to accept any monetary help the Ashram authorities donated these things. They promised to render more assistance when they learnt that the school was being run for the welfare of the helpless children and that too principally by three inspired and kind-hearted ladies. She saris have been gifted by the Ashram authorities—one for aunty, one for Shakuntala Devi and one for Ratna Devi. Ratna's eyes gleamed when she heard Sudhakar mention her name as "Ratna Devi". Was it the break-through of the sun from the enveloping mass of clouds? Ratna wondered. Shakuntala hesitatingly accepted the gift and profusely thanked Sudhakar for his help to the school.

*

The appointed day came. From Waini Station right upto the European club, a distance of seven miles, the troops of the Bihar Light Infantry took up positions with rifles in hand. Uniformed mounted policemen trotted in pairs on the main road through which His Excellency's motorcade was to pass. From behind the palm-groves, the nervous village-folks stared at the biggest show in Waini. Never before had they witnessed such a colourful pageant of *gora sipahis* standing on both sides of the road with *bandoos* (guns) on their shoulders. Chaman Ram was hard put to hold back his two kids who dared to break loose and run to the main road. "*Bhago, Bhago*" (Get away, get away) shouted the *deshi* (Indian) *darogas* (constables) as some of the urchins sought to come closer to the police lines.

Near the Waini Post office, scout master Digambar Jha had assembled on the road his bunch of scouts since nine in the morning. "March" "Halt" "March" "Halt" - the commands sounded like a refrain. An hour went by. Still no trace of the motorcade. "Fall in lines" came the next command. Two rows were formed on both sides of the road. "Salute". Up went the staffs of the scouts as the word of command came. Fruitless exercises for a couple of hours in the hot sun were extremely excruciating. The boys could hardly stand; their eyes began to burn; their knees began to wobble. "Damn the Digambar" "Damn the Lat Saheb". Murmurs of anger could be heard from the ranks. But they were not articulate enough. When the endurance of the boy scouts had almost reached the breaking point, a posse of mounted *gora sipahis* galloped past at full speed.

"It's coming, it's coming," the scout-master shouted. "Attention" came the command. The scouts picked up their staff and stood erect.

"Salute," the scout-master thundered.

The staffs went up to form an arch for the procession to pass through.

"Chorus" shouted the scout master.

As the boys sang in unison "God Save the King", the Viceregal motorcade passed through. Through bleary burning eyes, Benu could just catch a glimpse of a hand waving through the closed glass window of the Viceregal vehicle.

The biggest show in Naulakha was over.

*

Next morning as Benu attended his school a huge placard greeted his eyes. The words etched on the placard in bold letters read: Inquilab Zindabad, Bande Matram. Amritlal Murdabad. Digambar Jha Murdabad. Slogans were also written by some unknown person or persons on all the class-room black-boards.

A commotion gripped the school. The burly Headmaster moved up and down the corridor with his lethal cane and gave orders to the class teachers to rub off the seditious writings on the black-boards. The poster was torn and burnt. An emergent meeting was summoned in the Headmaster's room, where all the teachers assembled, visibly shaken. "Mr. Jha," thundered the Headmaster, "since your name has been mentioned you'll have to find out the culprit. Interrogate all the scouts, cajole them, coax them, threaten them. I must know the name of the culprit. Sedition in a Government School? It's unpardonable."

"I'll do my best, Sir," Digambar Jha said. "Let me have three day's time. "

So Digambar Jha got a respite. But in those three days what happened none could say. Benu was questioned but he flatly denied any knowledge of the episode or the prime actor. But at the end of the third day all the higher class students were summoned to the playground in front of the gymnasium. There the Headmaster administered a strong admonition to the boys and threatened to rusticate anyone found to be indulging in seditious activities. "Beware," threatened the Headmaster, "if no one volunteers to give information about the author of these writings, I'm going to cane each and every student. To begin with I'll punish the scouts, because, to my mind the nefarious deed has been done by a scout who hated the scout-master, Digambar Jha."

One by one the name of each boy scout was called and he came

went the cane. Two lashes-one in each hand. Benu got his second caning, the first one was years back when he had failed to buy his drawing copy.

When the turn of the Bhuskaul-born Ramdeo Prasad came to receive the corporal punishment, the cane, Amritlal's lethal cane, suddenly got transfixed in his hands as Ramdeo blurted out, "Stop. Why do you punish all the boys for the fault of one? I've written the words which you consider to be offensive. I'll write a hundred times and utter umpteen times the words which you consider to be seditious. Inquilab Zindabad. Bande Matram."

For a while a hush fell on the gathering. Then what followed was a crude exhibition of brutality. "Whish" "Whish" went the cane of the Headmaster on Ramdeo's body, not once but over twenty times. And all the while Ramdeo went on uttering "Inquilab Zindabad". "You bloody son of a Swarajist," the Headmaster thundered, "you're rusticated. Get out of the school, at once."

Revolutionary spirit had permeated Waini at last.

*

The following day Ramdeo Prasad lay in his Bhuskaul hamlet with a high fever attended with delirium. So shocked were the villagers at the inhuman treatment meted out to a village lad by the Headmaster of the Waini School, that all went in a procession to the house of Babu Viswanath Prasad, who was considered to be the leading light of Bhuskaul. A shocked Viswanath Prasad sent telegrams to the Governor, Director of Public Instruction, the Inspector of Schools, and the political leaders drawing attention to the inhuman act of the Head Master and demanding his immediate arrest. Shakuntala in the meantime had a doctor summoned from Naulakha, who on examination of the patient shrugged his head and said: "It's a serious case. I suspect cerebral haemorrhage. Rest is in God's hand."

Ramdeo Prasad could not be saved. Babu Viswanath Prasad consoled the weeping parents and said: "Ramdeo is dead but he's ignited a fire which will burn fiercely not only in Waini but in many parts of Bihar. In years to come Bihar would be the vanguard of revolutions against the British Raj." The words of Babu Viswanath Prasad sounded prophetic.

*

Amabas Day in Kali Mata temple in Dighra. As was customary on such an occasion about hundred men and women had converged in the

temple premises to offer prayers to the Goddess. "She's omnipotent, omniscient. She's the eternal spirit pervading the universe. *Sarbam Khalu Idam Brahma*. Whatever you see before you, the animate and the inanimate, is She. She's the supreme consciousness. *Tat Twam Asi*." The temple priest was delivering the discourse for the devotees who had assembled in the spacious hall of the temple. The discourse over, began the *arti* (invoking benediction) of the Goddess as men and women stood with silent prayers in their hearts. Joss sticks and earthen lamps, the scent of flowers and leaves, the incense, the aroma, the blowing of conches and the ringing of bells lent an air of enchantment, an air of divine bliss which the devout gathering inhaled deeply, fervently. "O Goddess Kali. Thou art the healer. Thou art the purifier. Thou art the giver of bliss. Give me peace. Om Shanti, Om Shanti. Om Shanti." The devotees bowed down before the Goddess reverentially as the priest sprinkled holy water.

Among the crowd of devotees was Shakuntala and Ratna. The temple priest recognised Ratna. "My daughter! Seeing you after a long time. Are you happy with your new master," he enquired. Ratna bowed down and touched his feet. "I'm very happy, sir, but here's my friend, Shakuntala Devi, of Bhuskaul. She has some problems." Shakuntala did the customary courtesies and the priest gave her his blessings. "Take these flowers which were offered to the Goddess today and keep them with you. Kali Mata will fulfil your desires."

Outside among the crowd of pedlars, and sellers of sweets and flowers, Ratna looked for the kind and benevolent maternal figure, Bahu Dai. The usual spot where Bahu Dai used to sit and do the vending of baked *dalpuris* was occupied by a slim, middle-aged woman whom every body accosted as Susmi. "Mai (mother)", said Ratna, "could you please tell me where to find Bahu Dai. She used to sit here and sell *dalpuris*." "Bahu Dai?" The woman looked up in surprise. "She's dead long ago. Killed by a *gora siphai* in Bairia Dhaf."

"Killed?"

"Yes." the woman nodded.

The facts as gleaned by Ratna were lamentable indeed. For some time the Naulakha authorities had apprehended that the Bairia Dhaf was a hide-out of terrorists. Indeed many a Gora Saheb in Naulakha had heard sounds of gun fire at night. Following the arrest of a Naulakha boy with a revolver the police came to know all about the secret rendezvous of the armed terrorists. In a swift two-pronged armed attack—one from the river-side and another from the Gorai Ghat road skirting the Dhaf—the

young revolutionaries, whom Bahu Dai used to call Babuas, were flushed out and gunned down. Bahu Dai was among those who were killed.

"How is it we never heard about it" Ratna asked.

"Such things are never publicised. Government came with a report that several dacoits were killed in an encounter with the police in the jungles around Waini."

"What a *zulum*! (atrocities)" Shakuntala heaved a sigh.

"But the sacrifice of the Babuas was not in vain. One of the local boys was among a group who shot dead a *gora Distit* (District) *majistat* (Magistrate) somewhere in Bangal (Bengal)." Susmi seemed to be well-informed. The *gora* Magistrate she mentioned was no other than the District Magistrate of Midnapur in Bengal.

"So the fire's burning." Shakuntala said as she and Ratna took leave and proceeded towards Bhuskaul.

The committed police authorities did not take any action against the Waini High School Headmaster. Sedition among the students was a serious thing and discipline had to be maintained at any cost. It hardly mattered whether a village school-boy lived or died. The important matter was that no revolutionary slogan like "Inquilab Zindabad", "Bande Matram" should again be raised within the precincts of the Government School. "Burn them, kill them. All sons of bitches. Hang them on a pole in Waini Bazar for all the people to see and imbed the lesson," the *gora* D.S.P. cursed and twirled his moustache and adjusted his *sola topi* (hat) as he paced up and down the Waini Police station.

But who could stem the tide of the Burhi Gandak when it forcefully heaved its bosom and boiled down like a seething turbulent mass of churning waters? Who could also contain the mass upsurge of emotion of a thousand people—an emotion as spontaneous as it was indignant—as they thronged the Waini Bazar and marched towards the Waini Police Station with the slogans "*marenge ya marenge*" (we'll kill or be killed). A rampart of *gora sipahis* with guns at the ready confronted the angry marchers. A horrendous situation was about to develop. The agitated masses of indignant marchers were advancing slowly, determinedly with shouts of "Bande Matram" and "Inquilab Zindabad".

Before the point of no return was about to be reached some one cried at the top of his voice: "*Thahero*" (stop) and breaking through the lines in a hurricane speed faced the angry lathi-wielding marchers.

"Kill me, if you'll," said the stranger. "But don't let your precious blood spill. Those people there won't heed any reason. But they'll learn soon. They've lit a fire which will burn throughout the land till the last vestiges of colonial rule are wiped out like a soiled page of history."

The effect was electrifying. Who's this youngman standing before them? A mushroom growth of beard hid his handsome face, but only partially. A *khadi kurta* and *pyjama* and a *khadi* cap on his head unmistakably showed that he was a Gandhian satyagrahi. A mesmeric power emanated from his dark shining eyes.

"*Bolo* Gadhiji Ki Jai. Inquilab Zindabad. Bande Matram," shouted the stranger.

The seething mass of humanity shouted in chorus "Gandhiji Ki Jai, Inquilab Zindabad. Bande Matram." Slowly the guns of the *gora* Sahebs were lowered. Slowly the villagers turned their backs on the obdurate policemen, who were equally amazed.

"Wonderful! Most wonderful!" Muttered the red-faced *gora* Saheb.

"That chip of a khadi-clad Congressite seems to have hypnotised the masses. Well, it's all for the best. A nasty explosive situation has been diffused. *Ma Foi*."

"Beta (son). Who're you and what's your name?" enquired a *khadi*-clad grey-haired old gentleman who had heard the scintillating words of the stranger and observed his unperturbed face from the side-lines when things looked so utterly bleak, so horrifying. He indeed was a saviour, an angel of peace. or else how could he quieten the rising tempers of the emotionally-charged villagers from his native Bhuskaul. Although the stranger was young in years, Babu Viswanath Prasad felt an irresistible temptation to hug him and hold him to his bosom. The stranger looked at the shrunken face of his accoster, who appeared to be a venerable person, well past his sixties. "Shades of his father", he thought, as he picked up his satchel which had dropped to the ground. "My name is Verma. S.P. Verma. I live in Benaras. Well, I wanted to come to this place but something within tells me that I should go immediately to Benaras. My mother lives there." The stranger proceeded briskly towards Waini bazar.

Babu Viswanath Prasad stared at the receding figure. "Verma, that's what he said," Viswanath Babu mused trying to recall a familiar name. The initials of "S.P." however, did not mean a thing him. Viswanath

Babu regretted that he had forgotten to ask his full name. Well, he must go to Mahmuda and report to Ramanand Babu about the day's incident.

*

An astonishing news rocked the residents of Naulakha and the peripheral villages. Amritlal, the Headmaster of the Waini High School, had committed suicide. His body was found hanging from the ceiling. "This was inevitable," the temple priest told a gathering of worshippers. "The man was bitten by his own conscience and hence he took his own life. "Bolo Bom, Bolo Bom" (Praise to the Lord Shiva)."

Waini School was closed indefinitely.

XXV

NATURE, LIFE AND GOD

Evening came in Naulakha in myriad hues. First the rows of tall *sisham* trees running up to the rim of the Bairia Dhaf was bathed in a crimson hue. The greying clouds trailing like pads of cotton-silk in the western sky assumed a brightness as luminous as the face of a bashful maiden in the presence of her man on the nuptial day. Then the colours flickered. The orange merged into a greyish blue; then the blue turned into a darkish green, when finally a pall of gloom landed on the green turf on which Benu lay flat on his back. He was watching the metamorphosis which was taking place almost imperceptibly all around him, from the sky to the earth. Then one by one the stars glimmered like fire-flies of the firmament. He counted the brightest ones and then gave up the fruitless exercise. "That's the Great Bear," Benu said to himself and then hastened homewards inhaling the peace that the countryside exuded. What a pleasure it was to be alone in the midst of the great void, to feel the silence like the mother's embrace, to forget the fret and the fever that the wicked world generated. Some one seemed to din into his ears: "Don't despair" and Benu was thrilled. He was late, unusually late. He ought to have returned to his quarter as soon as the sun set. How would he face Mejoma, who must be keeping a vigil at the door. Benu knocked at the backdoor with a trepidation in his mind. He heard some shuffling of feet, some murmurs. Then the door was flung open and Benu drove straight into the skinny hands of Mejoma. "You burnt-faced monkey! You good-for-nothing vagabond boy! Where had you been so long," the invectives came from Mejoma's lips in a torrent. Before Benu could collect his wits, Mejoma's blows came into Benu's shoulders in quick succession. Shobha ran up to liberate Benu from the iron grip of her aunt. "Why're you beating him? Why do you always beat my brother," Shobha cried as she held Mejoma's hand, an unpremeditated act as daring as it was shocking. "What?" Mejoma thundered. "You chip of a girl daring to interrupt? Fie on you!" She pushed Shobha aside, who almost dashed against the guava tree in the middle of the courtyard. Just then Shibdas returned from the club. He surveyed the scene and realised what had happened. A deeply hurt Benu was fumbling with books in the living room. Shobha conveyed the details of the incident to Shibdas. "Benu returned rather late in the evening and hence he was taken to task by Mejoma," Shobha said.

Reclining on the easy chair, which was his usual resting place after a day's work, Shibdas called Benu. Slowly the dejected, dispirited boy came and stood beside him.

"Where had you been so long?" Shibdas asked.

"In the ground adjoining the hostel."

"Alone"

"Yes."

"What're you doing there."

"Seeing the clouds trailing; the cranes flying in a semicircle; the colours of the sky changing from purple to black; the stars glimmering in the sky; the Great Bear; and listening to sound of stillness." Shibdas looked at the small tender face of Benu, whose eyes were as deep as the deepest sea. It appeared to Shibdas as if the boy standing before him was not his own brother, but a denizen of some other world— a poet, a philosopher and an angel all combined into one. Here was a boy, Shibdas thought, who was endowed with some uncanny powers of divination. It was not mere star-gazing but a much deeper involvement with Nature, the great healer, which had its own mystic music for the attenuated ears. How many could read the message which the great void, the vast silence sought to convey? How many would care to listen to it? Wordsworth was among those who read, and understood Nature and learnt the message it sought to give: "To me the meanest flower that blows can give thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears."

Benu was standing before Shibdas pursuant to his orders. As if recalled from a reverie, Shibdas asked Benu to go to the book-shelf and bring two books: Palgrave's Golden Treasury and Poetical Works of Wordsworth. Benu was not prepared for such a command, having envisaged a more fearful donouement, but he did as he was told. Shibdas thumbed through the pages until he found the poems that he loved most, that he would like Benu to listen, read and comprehend, a sort of introduction to the wonderful world of literature, the fascinating realm of poetry, where Man and Nature blended into a subtle spirituality, the Brahma of the Vedantists.

Shibdas recited two poems: Grey's Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard and Wordsworth's Intimations of Immortality from Recollection of Early Childhood. Benu listened as Shibdas read:

"The curfew tolls the knell of parting day;
The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea;
The plowman homeward plods his weary way,
And leaves the world to darkness and to me."

A gathering, creeping darkness seemed to envelop his brother's mien. Benu stood transfixed, lapping every word that fell from his brother's lips. Then he heard his brother recite a longer poem, slowly, musically, the cadences falling like dew drops in a grassy field. Benu listened:

"Thanks to the human heart by which we live,
Thanks to its tenderness, its joys and tears,
To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears."

As he finished reading Shibdas asked Benu to read, whenever he got time, Palgrave's Golden Treasury. A wonderful world suddenly opened up before Benu—the world of Nature, of Love, of God.

Benu slept profoundly that night as the winds howled and the rains lashed.

*

A realisation dawned on Benu that he had grown up. His sister Shobha had outgrown him. Instead of the frilled frock she wore the sari, a costume which fitted her admirably and made her look beautiful. Mejoma was now less harsh with Shobha knowing fully well that the time had come for Shobha to enter into a household other than her own.

One night Benu heard his brother say to Mejoma: "I've two tasks to perform: one's Shobha's marriage and the other marriage of Khokun. Then I'll retire. No more burden on me. As to Babla and baby Kamal, Benu would take care of them when they grow up." A bird shrieked in the branch of the overgrown guava tree. An owl must have gripped it in its talons. Benu closed his eyes and prayed for the safety of the hapless victim.

*

One fine morning Benu heard the electrifying news. Shobha was going to be given away in marriage and Benu's *upanayan* (sacred thread ceremony) was going to be celebrated. Taking into account the cost of ornaments and other gifts, the estimated cost of dowry was found to be in the region of five thousand rupees. What dowry was Benu did not know. But he gathered that it was a sort of transaction for giving away a daughter in marriage. The idea of demanding cash gifts or dowry was simply repulsive. How his Dada would meet the expenditure was anybody's guess. Benu soon learnt that a decision had been taken in family council to

mortgage the property in Muzaffarpur to a cloth merchant and borrow the amount. Interest to the tune of rupees two hundred was to be paid every year till such time as the loan remained unpaid.

The consideration that weighed with Shibdas in borrowing money was not only the happiness of his last unmarried sister but the fulfilment of the unfinished task of his parents, a task which would not have been accomplished but for divine blessings. There was a mirror in the living room, a legacy of his departed father, on one corner of which a miniature figure of the Goddess Kali was embossed in colour. Shibdas used to fold his hands in salutation before the Goddess when leaving for office every day. One day he said to his wife, Suprova, in a lighter vein: "Look, Suprova. It's no ordinary mirror. It mirrors the ups and downs of the family, from my father downwards. How and wherefrom it came to be acquired, I don't know. but I'm seeing it since infancy. My sons will see it and may be my grandsons. Keep it and protect it. Suprova could not say a word, so mystified she was by her husband's utterances. But one day she had the mirror brought down from its perch on the wall and fixed on a table, a dexterous manoeuvre for which Shibdas had given her many kudos. "Well done, Su," Shibdas had said, "now it wouldn't fall or crack; if anything happens to the contrary a terrible..." Suprova did not allow Shibdas to complete the sentence and stifled his voice by placing her hands on his lips. Shibdas had laughed at her temerity.

On the appointed day Shoba's marriage was celebrated with customary gaiety.

XXVI

END OF A PHASE

Ramanand Mishra had known no respite for a long period. He had to commute between Mahmuda and Darbhanga, the district Headquarters, in connection with the Will bequeathed to him by Rajju Sah. The probate of the Will being over, he had lost no time to get in touch with the Tuberculosis Hospital at Kanke, Ranchi. The hospital authorities had gratefully accepted the donation of rupees two lakhs on behalf of the late Raju Shah. The letter sent by them had just been received and Ramanand read out the contents thereof to his wife, Sumitra.

"Dear Mr. Mishra,

Thank you very much for your letter. The T.B. Hospital is grateful for the donation of rupees two lakhs made by the late Mr. Rajju Sah, who had bequeathed the amount to you in his Will. Examples of such generosity are rare. In keeping with the last wish of Mr. Sah, we have decided to build an annexe to the hospital where research work on Tuberculosis would be intensively carried on. The hospital has also decided to offer free treatment to any T.B patient hailing from Mahmuda, the native place of late Mr. Rajju Sah.

Yours faithfully

Dr. A. Kunar."

Ramanand underlined the last sentence. "Now Rajju Sah's soul would rest in peace," he said.

Ramanand had hardly put the letter in the envelope when Babu Viswanath Prasad walked in leaning heavily on his stick. Sumitra went indoors. "Ram, Ram Viswanath Babu", Ramanand extended the usual courtesies. "What's the news around Bhuskaul?"

Babu Viswanath Prasad was too eager to narrate the details of the incident to which he had been an eye-witness. He recounted the flash-point confrontation of the infuriated villagers from Bhuskaul with the *gora sipahis* of Waini. The villagers would not budge and on the other side the *gora sipahis* were ready with their guns. Suddenly a young *khadi*-clad satyagrahi, that is how he looked to me, jumped between the two confronting lines and shouted "Gandhiji ki jai," "Bande Matram". The effect was electrifying. At his bidding the villagers retraced the steps. The youngman disappeared as quickly as he had come.

"Didn't you ask his name?"

"I did. He said: S.P. Verma, of Benaras. Obviously he was in a hurry and he went off in the direction of the Station. I feel I ought to have asked his full name."

"Well, Viswanath Babu, Benaras is not far away. If he's a dedicated Gandhian satyagrahi, as he appeared to be, we shall hear more of him some day, some where. Now tell me about the village upliftment programme. I'm sorry I couldn't keep a watch as I was busy with the hospital project," Ramanand said.

Babu Viswanath Prasad was eloquent. The topic was dear to his heart, more so because his daughter, Shakuntala, was involved in it and as much involved as Ramanand's nephew, Sudhakar.

"You'll have to see it to believe," Viswanath Prasad said. "They've set up a literacy centre in Bhuskaul, a craft centre in Dighra and, as you're well aware, a primary school is functioning in your own Mahmuda."

"Yes, yes," Ramanand said. "Sudhakar and Shakuntala, are leaving no stone unturned to bring in a breath of fresh air in the villages."

"That craft centre idea is excellent," Vishwanath Babu said. "It gives opportunity to village women to utilise their spare time in making such articles as baskets, cane chairs, toddlers' cot and swings, etc. Sudhakar arranges their sale. The sale proceeds are distributed among the villagers. That gives them confidence. Sudhakar has arranged with the Mission at Muzaffarpur for giving training to the unskilled workers. It gives me great joy to see Sudhakar and Shakuntala work like two dedicated persons. A happy pair indeed!"

Ramanand Mishra was thinking. He did not hear what Vishwanath Prasad said about Shakuntala and Sudhakar. He was thinking about someone else—Ratna. She was another dedicated worker.

"What about Ratna?" he asked.

"She's taken over charge of the primary school. She's a nice girl."

Ramanand nodded. He then narrated to his friend Vishwanath Prasad all about Rajju Sah's will and the letter that he had received from the T.B. Hospital in Ranchi.

"You've done a great job Mishraji," Viswanath Babu said. "If we had more such dedicated men like you, our Waini village complex would turn into a Panchvati."

"That task of bringing over a change in the outlook of men and women here has been left to Sumitra Devi."

Ramanand laughed as Viswanath Prasad took leave.

*

Sumitra was in a fighting mood. She confronted Ramanand as he was getting ready to go out on his usual round in the village. "You appear to be too busy with your public affairs and you don't get time to look into urgent domestic matters," Sumitra said to Ramanand.

"Why, Why?"

"Did you ever think that your nephew Sudhakar is in the right age of marriage? You've to find a bride for him. And then there's Sujata. You've to find a proper groom for him."

"Sujata? She's child."

"No. By the time you search a suitable groom, she'll be seventeen". I don't need to search," Ramanand said. "The groom has been selected already. But you'll have to wait."

Sumitra was taken aback. "Who's the groom? You never told me before?"

Ramanand smiled.

"If you want to know, Sumitra, I may tell you that the groom is no other than Amitabha, the son of my college friend and now the leading lawyer of Muzaffarpur, Rambilas. We had a sort of undertaking, a promise, when I was at his house in Muzaffarpur after my release from jail."

"But Amitabha? What's he?"

"He's a third year M.B.B.S. student in Patna Medical College." Sumitra remembered in a flash those hectic days when she had sent, pursuant to her husband's advice, an S.O.S. to Rambilas Babu. So Amitabha was the son of her husband's friend. She was not fetich about caste or community prejudices. It was enough that Amitabha was a Brahmin and a qualified Brahmin as that. It hardly mattered that he wasn't a Maithil.

"But if Amitabha doesn't approve Sujata?" Sumitra asked her husband. Ramanand Mishra smiled and looked at his wife's countenance wreathed in joy and suspense.

"Amitabha has seen Sujata and has already approved her. Rambilas has told me so."

"Where? When?"

"At Benu's house. You know Sujata and myself attended the marriage function of Benu's sister, Shobha, where Rambilas, his wife and son were present. A nice moment it was to settle the match."

Sumitra was overwhelmed with joy. She stepped forward and rested her head on her husband's shoulders—a gesture which signified faith, love, adoration and admiration. Ramanand caressed his wife fondly and then suddenly as a thought crossed his mind, he pulled himself from Sumitra's embrace and asked, "Where's Sujata?"

"She's gone to Benu. His *upanayan*" ceremony takes place tomorrow. You ought to remember the invitation.

"Yes, yes. I completely forgot." Ramanand thanked Sumitra for reminding him.

*

Benu's household was brimming with joy. Not because of the *upanayan* ceremony, which was to take place on the following forenoon, but because of the expected arrival of Shobha and her husband, Kailashpati. How graceful did Shobha look? Her rich milk-white complexion was further enhanced by the colourful apparel with which she had draped her body. Like the proverbial fairy queen Shobha flitted about the house, stroking Benu's cheeks, kissing and hugging Babla and Kamal, who were too happy to be united with their aunty after an absence of several months. There was another reason for the gaiety, which transcended the forewalls of the small three-roomed quarter of Shibdas and infected the Babus—all neighbours—and their families. That was the magic box which Kailashpati had brought with him from Allahabad, a thing unheard of in Naulakha. News spread from mouth to mouth that Shibdas's brother-in-law had brought a thing called 'Radio' which emitted sounds transmitted from exotic lands without the aid of any connecting wire. They had heard about the Radio but they had not so far seen a set in action. So when the news went that a demonstration was to take place in the evening all were keyed up for the big occasion.

While preparations were going on to accommodate the visitors, whose number was expected to be quite large, and an aerial was being fixed atop the roof by two energetic youngmen of the neighbourhood, Benu

went out to collect the dried reeds (*kusha*) from the river-side, which were an essential concomitant for the *upanayan* ceremony. Along with Benu went Sujata, who had come in the morning to participate in the ceremony. Together they wandered along the river bank gathering weeds and plucking flowers that grew on the spacious College ground. Sheer curiosity led them into the interior of that imposing structure known as Naulakha. The polished marble floors, the wide spiral stairs, the tall glass windows and the giant domes wrought in Gothic style sent a shiver through Sujata's tiny frame.

"I'm afraid," she said as she clung to Benu.

"Hold my hands, Suji," Benu said. "Let's go to the roof. We'll have a fuller view of the land around us. You'll be able to see Mahmuda as well."

So together they climbed up the stairs until they reached the top. From there the Burhi Gandak appeared like a creek and the Bairia Dhaf like a mantle of green spread on the ground. To the west, as far as eyes could see, there were undulating fields of mustard and rye. As he surveyed the scene a vapour appeared before Benu's eyes, and blotted out the landscape. He blinked and then cried: "Suji, Sujata! Hold me. I'm trembling. This building is shaking, the dome's shaking. O God! It'll crumble and collapse."

Sujata was awe-struck. Seeing Benu tremble from head to foot, she held him tightly, strongly, with all the powers she could command. She made him sit on the floor and took his giddy head in her lap and pressed her lips into Benu's and fondled and kissed him as a mother caresses her infant child.

"What's happened to you, Benu? The building isn't shaking. It's you who are shaking. Now open your eyes." Slowly the spasm passed away.

Benu was once again on his legs.

"I have had a terrible vision, Sujata," he said. "The building is going to crack. May be I won't see you again. Let's go home but please don't mention about this dream."

Kailashpati, Benu's brother-in-law, sat on a chair with the crude contraption called the Radio on the table. There was a circular loud speaker in front and a number of wires, like the filaments of a giant lobster, radiating from the box to a battery kept on the floor. Outside, the lawn was full of visitors and the courtyard was teeming with women-folk.

Kailashpati turned the knob. First a murmur, then a screeching sound like the whish whish of the wind, and then a soft musical voice like the soft murmur of the waves, descended on the expectant Babus, straining their ears for every sound that the box did produce.

"What language is that" Nibaran Babu asked.

"Russian. This is Moscow," Kailashpati said.

"Tune for London," Radhika Babu said.

"No, no. Let's hear Moscow," Nibaran Babu persisted.

"No, no. We don't understand a thing in Russian. Tune for London."

Poor Kailashpati ! Like a deft harmonium player he switched on from Moscow to London and London to Moscow. "Bah, Bah. What a music!" echoed a few voices. Inside the house, the women-folk marvelled at the thing. "What music came out of it! Jai ho, Jai ho." There was a chorus of praise for the apparatus and for Kailashpati. The excitement went on for quite sometime when the operator, to the disappointment of everyone, announced that the battery had ceased to function. So ended the evening, preceding Benu's *upanayan* day.

A great day it was for Benu. His head was shaven clean; his ears were pierced and plugged with silver trinket. Then followed rituals; chanting of mantras. These continued for some hours and thereafter a thread of reed was placed across his left shoulder. Then followed further mantras. Finally he was robed in saffron clothes and given a cotton thread to be worn across his shoulders. With a staff in one hand and a satchel on his shoulders, Benu was a replica of a Brahmachari (a saffron—clad sadhu). After a gruelling marathon sitting before smoke and fumes he took refuge in the dark room, his head covered with a saffron cloth. In the dark room he must stay for three nights and on the fourth day take a dip in the Burhi Gandak to mark the culmination of the ceremony.

Outside the family priest—*cum*—astrologer was telling Shibdas: "From today Benu would enter a new phase in his life. The evil planets that aspected his *lagna* (birth sign) have moved to other positions. He won't have those premonitions any more."

Among the invitees to the reception that evening were Ramanand Mishra, Sumitra and Sujata.

*

Shakuntala was browsing among the books in the morning when Sudhakar dismounted from his bicycle at the garden gate. Along with him was another person who carried a medical box on his cycle-carrier.

It was the transitional period when the coolness of winter slowly gave way to warmth, and butterflies fluttered among the marigolds in search of honey-dew. Hidden somewhere among the leafy branches the cuckoo sent full-throated notes. Shakuntala opened the garden gate to welcome the visitors.

"What a surprise, Sudhakar Babu! What's the matter?" she asked looking at the box-like thing which the other person carried.

Sudhakar smiled and said: "A beginning has to be made. Here's my friend the vaccinator. We're conducting a vaccination programme. Cases of small-pox have been reported, not here of course. We wouldn't like to take chances."

"You think my life's valuable," Shakuntala looked straight at Sudhakar. A smile was flickering in the corners of her mouth.

"Why, of course. All lives are valuable. It's not only your life but the lives of all the people in the village. If not contained, infection from one person may endanger other persons also."

Shakuntala was impressed. Here was a youngman whose enthusiasm could not be contained, whose large-heartedness could not be ignored. His smile was infectious.

"But have you vaccinated yourself?" Shakuntala asked.

"Certainly. Not only myself but all the members of our household, including Ramu and Ramjiwan. After vaccinating you and uncle we'll proceed to Chipiatoli. We'll take Ratna. She may persuade the women-folk who seem to be allergic to the very idea of vaccination." Sudhakar was irresistible.

Shakuntala made them sit in the living room and went upstairs to call her father. Babu Viswanath Prasad was elated to see Sudhakar. On being told about Sudhakar's mission he patted him on his back and said: "Noble indeed. A very valuable work you're doing. But be careful, don't unduly expose yourself to risk." Sudhakar laughed. "God's in the Heaven and all's right with the world," he said.

Babu Vishwanath Prasad allowed himself to be vaccinated first. The Shakuntala exposed her bare arm to the vaccinator as Sudhakar watched. "That's it. You're immunised," he said. After Sudhakar left Babu Viswanath Prasad commented, "a noble soul, a very noble person indeed."

Shakuntala sat motionless on the chair. She could very well understand the context in which her father's observations, although in a low key, were made. "O Sumant! Where're you? How long shall I suffer and let others suffer on my account?" Shakuntala murmured to herself and then hid her face with her palms.

*

It was a hell of a task to convince the Harijans living in the hovels of Chipiatoli as to the advantages of vaccination. "If you don't get yourself vaccinated God's wrath will pour on you. You'll die *en masse*," Ratna told a shrivelled woman named Jato, renowned for her fulminations and foul tongue. Seeing Ratna standing by Sudhakar's side, the woman burst out with vile vituperation. "What? You say we'll die. You despicable bastard! You'll die. You *marad* (husband) will die. Your father will die. Get out of my hut, you daughter of a bitch."

A volcano was about to burst. Sudhakar advanced to drag the foul-mouthed vampire from the hut before he could do so, Ratna jumped at the throat of the atrocious woman and hit her in the chin with all the force she could command. "You dirty swine! This is for your curses," she blurted out and showered blows after blows till the witch of a woman fell on the ground writhing in pain. "Let's move on," Ratna said to Sudhakar. "These wretched people are destined to die."

The incident at Chipiatoli was duly reported to Ramanand Mishra by Sudhakar. He heard the details in silence, then paced up and down the room, his face contorted with grief. After a silence, which seemed interminable, he faced Sudhakar and said; "I knew such a thing would happen. If I remember aright I cautioned you about the complete apathy of the village people towards visitations of epidemics and even death. These things are considered by the village folks as expressions of God's wrath. Vaccination has no significance for them. I see in this incident the age-old conflict between ignorance and enlightenment, between pride and prejudice. Ratna should not have been too touchy even though she was rudely shaken by the fulminations of that foul-mouthed woman. A woman, who is deeply steeped in prejudices, doesn't take kindly to the new innovations, to the preventive or prophylactic measures initiated for their welfare. Your intention was good but your approach was wrong. Instead of directly approaching the villagers of Chipiatoli, you should have enlisted the support of the village headman, the Mukhiya. However nothing is lost. There's time enough to mend the fences.

*

Time eludes even the astutest of planners. Mr. Shawcross, the new Director had planned to introduce a sort of revolution in the agricultural sector in the quickest possible time but his plans went awry, not because of the intrinsic flaws or chinks in his blue print, but because of the failure of the human agency with whose support he sought to activate his schemes. No revolution either in the agricultural or industrial sector, could be ushered in without the active participation of the workers. Non-participation by workers could be due to various factors, the chief among them being the incapacitation of workers due to mass outbreak of epidemics.

Everyday the Thikedar underlined in red the names of absentee labourers: Birjoo Mahto, Sitaram Kurmi, Kesho, Dinanath. What had happened? Then there were further drop-outs. None reported from Bhuskaul Chipiatoli, Dighra and Waini Bazar. The matter became alarming. The Estate manager, with a quivering voice, reported to the Director: "Sir, small-pox has broken out in an epidemic form in the villages around the Institute."

"What?" Shawcross jumped up from his chair, as if he had seen a ghost staring at him.

"Small-pox, Sir."

"My god! Send an SOS to the Commissioner, Tirhut Division and ask him to send vaccines to the Hospital on an immediate basis. Let him undertake through the District agencies a programme of mass vaccination."

"Within the campus too there have been a few cases," the Estate manager mumbled.

"May the Lord protect them! Issue orders for the complete quarantine of the Babus in whose quarters cases have been noticed. Complete isolation. Ask Dr Michael and his team to visit every house for vaccinating the inmates."

By evening of the same day news spread like a wild fire that the Institute's cashier, Haran Babu, had died of small-pox. It was rumoured that he contracted the killer disease at Muzaffarpur, where he had gone to collect the salaries of the employees from the Government Treasury. As mourners proceeded along the road to Gorai Ghat chanting "Ram Ram Satya Hai" (Only god's name is eternal and true), a hush fell in every household. It looked as if the spectre of death was secretly, stealthily shadowing the puny earthly creatures of the Naulakha campus. Never

before were they so utterly defenceless as now, in the face of an unseen adversary holding the entire country-side to ransom.

Motiram of Chipiatoli was the first to face the onslaught of the dreaded disease and he succumbed to death in three days. His relations fled in terror. The body of that vituperative woman, Jato, was thrown by disdainful villagers after her death following a seizure. The epidemic which trotted at an easy pace, now raced in a fine gallop. Chipiatoli wore a deserted look as the villagers fled their hamlets leaving the dead or dying.

"Hell's been let loose here," shouted Faku Mian as he abandoned his afflicted wife and ran. But he could not go far. At Dighra, where he sojourned, a pall of darkness suddenly descended before his eyes as he lay on a cot with high fever accompanied with delirium. Then those blisters, or pustules, which they called small-pox, appeared on his person and atrophied his brain. Faku dreamt that Bibijan was bending over him and almost touching his lips.

Sundar Pasi could not forget the *katia* (earthen jug) which contained the fermented brew. "A drop, a drop, let me have a drop," he ejaculated while licking his parched tongue. But who would listen to him? A stray dog forced his way into the room and while nosing into the *katia* overturned it, spilling the contents on the floor. And all the while Sundar Pasi looked vacantly, through his fixed glassy eyes. Death was instantaneous.

Jagdeep Pandey, the temple priest of Mahmuda, swore and cursed all those who were responsible for the grisly state of things. "Sitala Mai," he said, "will wreak vengeance against all sinners who had made a mockery of *dharma* (religion). In this Kali Yug, he said, sinners were punished by visitations of god's wrath in the shape of epidemics. While the devotees congregated at the temple he enjoined on all of them to make offerings to the Goddess, Sitala. As offerings poured in the shape of money and materials, Jagdeep Pandey grinned in satisfaction. There were shouts of "Jai Mataji" in the temple precincts. But by the evening Pandeyji lay on bed shivering with a high fever and with a throbbing pain in his temple. On the third day the by-now-familiar rashes appeared. On the fourth day Pandeyji was in delirium. The end came on the fifth day. The *pujari* (priest) must have misappropriated temple funds, some one whispered, as the bedecked body of Pandeyji was led along the Gorai Ghat Road to the cremation ground.

Babu Ramdas of Dighra was now a man of influence. Having acquired the zemindari of issueless Natwarlal by means of a dubious *wasiyat nama* (will), he had courted the *sarkar* (Government) with an uncommon zeal and had gathered around him a band of trusted lieutenants. He did not trust the high caste Hindus and had allotted land to the Muslims and Harijians, who tended his fields and raised crops on a share cropping basis. Ramdas was a loyalist to the core and even before he became a zemindar he employed his *chamchas* (sycophants) to keep an eye on the anti-Raj activities, which in plain words, meant sedition. If any anti-Government demonstration or meeting was held or proposed to be held in Waini and the peripheral villages, his men were on the side-lines to disturb or sabotage such meetings by any means, fair or foul. Having acquired power and pelf, Ramdas sought to ingratiate himself to the Government by handsome contributions to charitable causes or schemes launched by the Government. Learning that Babu Ramanand Mishra was planning to set up a hospital at Mahmuda, Babu Ramdas bestirred himself and exerted his influence to stall the project. By pulling the appropriate strings in the corridors of power in the Secretariat at Patna, Ramdas sought to convey the impression to the Raj that Mahmuda would become a strong focal point for terrorist and anti-Government activities with Ramanand Mishra as the popular Congressite leader. His tactics paid and the hospital project was pigeon-holed in the Provincial Secretariat. But Ramdas was himself to be blamed when the spectre of small-pox swept through the village, his own native village of Dighra, leaving hundreds of affected villagers without any medical aid, the Naulakha authorities having barred entry to all external cases of small-pox. Like a giant leviathan the epidemic coursed its slimy way from hamlet to hamlet, house to house and finally exposed its deadly fangs in the hall of power, that is, the residence of zemindar of Dighra, Ramdas Maharaj. On a huge mahogany *palank* (bed) lay the zemindar Babu fighting for his life, while his attendants poured Ganga-jal (Ganga water) in his half-opened mouth. Doctors were summoned but they shrugged their heads. "There's no medicine in our pharmacopeia," they said from a distance and beat a hasty retreat. In his delirium Ramdas mumbled a few words, Ratna, Natwarlal—poison—and then began to sink rapidly.

There was no respite for Ramanand Mishra. Like a missionary he moved from lane to lane, house to house in his native Mahmuda with a band of dedicated volunteers sent by the swamiji of the Mission at Muzaffarpur. With him walked Sudhakar and Ratna, messengers of mercy, with bottles of disinfectants, and buckets of lime, for spraying the affected hamlets. Thanks to the timely vaccination programme launched by Sudhakar and Ratna, the casualties at Mahmuda were only a few. But

the vaccination programme did not provide complete immunity to those vaccinated. There was a milder variation of the disease, chicken pox, which, although not fatal in most cases, caused considerable discomfort to those affected by it. And it was Sudhakar who contracted this disease in the first instance. He lay in an isolated chamber with pain and fever. Then the rashes appeared. And all the time Ratna sat by his bed-side, giving the medicines or applying cold towel on his fevered brow. She attended to every need of the ailing patient, sometimes caressing his forehead, sometimes holding his unsteady hands, and all the time mumbling prayers for his recovery. And Sudhakar did recover. There were tears of joy in Ratna's eyes when Sudhakar said in a feeble voice: "You've brought me back to life, Ratna, You're my saviour."

Sumitra was at her native Darbhanga with Sujata at the time of the epidemic at Mahmuda and neighbouring villages. She had gone there to look up her ageing parents and to get Sujata admitted to a girls' high school. When the news of the epidemic appeared in Patna dailies, Sumitra was alarmed. She was alarmed and worried about her husband, about Sudhakar and other residents of her village. Could a woman, who was adored as the *mataji* (mother) by her people, could afford to stay back in peace while the village was being ravaged by the dreaded disease? She took the first available train for Waini with a relation of hers and reached Mahmuda on the day when Sudhakar had his first bath after recovery. Sumitra had never expected to see Sudhakar in such an emaciated condition. She realised the difficult times through which Ratna had passed. With a patient on one hand and the household on the other, there was hardly any respite for the poor girl. Sumitra held Ratna to her bosom and wept. Ramanand who had entered the room quietly was surprised to see both the women locked in embrace.

"Namaste, Chachiji!" Sudhakar said, welcoming his aunt with a feeble smile. "Ratna has brought me back to life."

"You'll have moments to celebrate the occasion, Sumitra," Ramanand said. "I came to announce that Shakuntala is very much ill. Rashes have appeared on her body. Will Ratna go and attend the patient?" A silence fell on the assemblage. Sumitra looked at Ratna. Ratna looked towards Sudhakar, who said: "Shakuntala Devi's needs are greater. Now that aunty has returned. I think Ratna can be spared, of course if she so desires."

"It would be my privilege to attend on Shakuntala Devi," Ratna said.

"I'll have Ratna as my daughter-in-law," Sumitra said to Ramanand Mishra when they were alone. "She'll be an ideal wife for Sudhakar. To me caste considerations don't matter. Ratna is non-Brahmin by caste, but she's more humane than others. It's love that counts above everything else." "I agree. Sooner they wed the better. Who know what will happen tomorrow," Ramanand said in a voice which indicated his pensive and drooping spirit. "Nothing will happen. My prayers to my deity won't be in vain," Sumitra said in an accent which surprised Ramanand. To him Sumitra appeared to be far bigger than a small human being. She looked like the towering resplendent figure of Goddess Durga, bedecked in all her finery, with a spear striking deep into the chest of the demon—Mahisasura—Durga, the destroyer of all evil, the epitome of all energy, all strength, in all living things:

"Ya Devi Sarvah Bhuteshu Sakti Rupena Samasthitha!"

Never before Ramanand had seen Sumitra as self-composed as now in the midst of the epidemic raging furiously in the hamlets of Waini and the surrounding villages."

*

Shakuntala did her social service in the Bhuskaul village independent of Sudhakar. The visits to the hamlets in the company of a few dedicated workers proved too strenuous a task for her frail feminine body. In a situation like this she needed, and needed rather desperately, a strong arm to hold her strongly and prevent it from stumbling and cracking like an earthen vessel. Shakuntala was chagrined at her own failure to think rationally. She realised that she had a duty towards her father but she was remiss in adequately fulfilling her obligations. How else could she explain the lapse, an almost unpardonable lapse, on her part to hold back from her father the fact of Sumant's nocturnal visit to her house? What explanation would she offer, when the time came to offer one, for her attachment to a youngman whose identity was not known to her father? While she had a duty towards her father, she had a duty to her own self. And that was to obey the dictate of her heart. She must continue to adore and worship the image installed in her heart. But what if the love of the person adored altered? What if the person whom she installed on a high pedestal in the innermost recesses of her heart never returned? No, it could not be. Somewhere she had read—ah, yes, it was Browning, Elizabeth Barret Browning—"Love is not love that alters when it alteration finds." Her love for Sumant would not alter, Sudhakar or no Sudhakar. Something within herself told her that Sumant would return and return soon. Cogitations like these forbade her from visiting the ailing

Sudhakar, although she kept herself posted with news about his progress towards recovery. But little did she realise that the tentacles, which she and her associates sought to break would one day coil around her like a boa constrictor and almost crush her to smithereens. Thus it so happened that by the time Sudhakar recovered, Shakuntala was afflicted with pox. None could tell for certain whether it was case of small-pox or chicken pox. Babu Viswanath Prasad prayed to God that He in His mercy might spare the life of her daughter and instead terminate his own existence, which was now bereft of any purpose or significance. So when Shakuntala lay on bed with high fever he thought it prudent to seek the help of Ratna from his friend, Ramanand Mishra.

When Ratna arrived Shakuntala was in a bad shape. She lay on a canvas cot with a linen draped over her body. Her head was uncovered and her hairs were dishevelled and hanging loosely around the pillow. In her delirium Shakuntala uttered the name of Sumanta which Ratna alone could understand. She put the ice-bag on Shakuntala's fevered brow and fanned her steadily to bring the temperature down. Unmindful of her own state of health Ratna nursed the patient for three days during which period Shakuntala's temperature abated and the rashes began to disappear. When the visiting doctor examined Shakuntala he expressed satisfaction at her rapid recovery, and was candid enough to admit that the nursing of Ratna, as also the vaccination which she had taken a month back, were primarily the two factors which saved her life. Shakuntala clasped Ratna's hands and whispered: "It's Sudhakar who was saved my life. It was he who insisted on the vaccination". Ratna turned her face to stifle a welling emotion.

A few days later, after her complete recovery, a post-man brought a letter, a closed envelope, addressed to Shakuntala Prasad care Babu Viswanath Prasad of village Bhuskaul, District Darbhanga. With a tremulous hand Shakuntala received the letter and examined the cover intently. The post-mark showed the despatching station as Patna. Who could be the sender? She tore the cover and as she read the sender's name at the bottom, there was a thumping in her heart. An ecstatic joy suddenly coursed through her frame. Her heart beat faster and faster. For a long time Shakuntala lay down on the bed, with the letter pressed to her chest, to control her surging feelings. For a brief period she closed her eyes to offer her grateful thanks to her deity. Then she read:

"My dear Shakuntala,

News have appeared in the local papers about the outbreak of small-pox in a virulent form in Waini and neighbouring villages. Our Seva Dal

(voluntary social organisation) have decided to send a relief team to Waini, which includes Bhuskaul village also. I don't know whether you're still there, but in any case I will call at your residence. Much water has flown down the Ganges since our last meeting. That's a long story and it'll take time to narrate the details in a letter. Two things I would like to mention. One is that I have, due to my own negligence, lost my mother, and the other is that my sister, Ratna is missing. I'm a tired man and I need all your help and support. I could not meet your father before we parted but I hope you did mention to him about my visit. With love.

Yours affectionately
Sumant

P.S.

Some months ago a strange thing happened. I felt an irresistible urge to visit you. I came right upto Waini, but then I remembered my mother and decided to proceed to Benaras straightway. At Waini there was a confrontation between two warring camps-British soldiers and desperate villagers. I helped in diffusing the situation. Before I left I met an elderly gentleman to whom I gave my name as S.P. Verma. The identity of the gentleman is not known to me. But I was impressed by his paternal solicitude for a bare-footed traveller like me.—S.

As soon as she had finished reading Shakuntala was almost overwhelmed with a deep ecstasy. She wished that Ratna were by her side so that she could share with her all the varied emotions-joy, sorrow and confusion. But Ratna was no longer with her. Her father too was also not at home.

Shakuntala flung herself on bed immersed in the divine bliss which seemed to rejuvenate her being, so long wasted by fatigue and illness. "O, Sumant. How I love you," she muttered to herself and then counted the hours away.

*

"A Seva Dal has arrived from Patna for relief work," Babu Ramanand Mishra told Viswanath Prasad who had come to report on Shakuntala's condition. "They're camping in Mahmuda right now. A youngman called Verma is heading the relief team which includes doctors as well."

"Verma?" Viswanath Prasad was startled.

"Yes. He's brilliant student of Patna university. His father was posted to Benaras, but the family hails from Patna, Bihar Sharif to be exact. The team met me in the kutchery last evening to solicit my help. I've asked

Verma to come and meet me today. It's wonderful to see the team work so methodically, so devotedly and so selflessly. Clean-up campaign, that's what they intend to do. The epidemic should not be allowed to spread and decimate all the local population. There's future for the country when we see youngmen like them engaging themselves in relief work in utter disregard of their personal safety. Don't you think so, Viswanath Babu?"

Before Vishwanath Prasad could give his reaction, Ramu announced the presence of Vermaji. Ramanand Mishra went outside to welcome the visitor, a bearded youngman whose countenance radiated unbounded courage, confidence and determination to get things done. Most appealing were the eyes which sparkled with an uncanny light that almost hypnotised the strongest adversary. The moment he saw the youngman, Vishwanath Babu got up with alacrity and said excitedly: "If I mistake not, you're S.P. Verma. I met you on that eventful day when a clash was imminent between the *gora sipahis* and the irate villagers.

"You're correct. I'm S.P. Verma—Sumant Prasad Verma."

"Sumant! O my son! You're the long-lost brother of Ratna. O what a co-incidence!" Babu Ramanand Mishra cried aloud which reached the inner apartment where Ratna was listening to Ramayana recital by Sumitra Devi. "Ratna! Come at once" shouted Ramanand Mishra. Apprehending some emergency Ratna jumped to her feet, and rushed towards the living room followed by Sumitra Devi. At the door step Ratna stood for a moment, and then glanced at the bearded face of the youngman. A sudden spark of recognition gleamed in her eyes. She rushed headlong into the advancing arms of Sumant, uttered one word 'Oh, Bhaiya!' and then swooned, clasped in the arms of her brother.

It was a dramatic scene. Just then Sudhakar entered the room and surveyed the scenario. As Ratna was slowly getting over the shock, Sudhakar felt the greatest thrill of his life when he recognised Sumant, his one-time class-mate in Patna Law college. "O Sumant! Sumant! Where had you been so long?" Sudhakar uttered an estatic cry and held Sumant in a deep embrace.

Sumitra Devi was a silent spectator of this family re-union. She drew her veil aside and said to her husband, Ramanand Mishra: "Tell Shakuntala's father that he should forthwith take Sumant to his residence, where his daughter is pining to see him. If Shakuntala's mother were alive today, she could have fathomed the depths of her daughter's mind and find out what made her daughter so ill, so frail and so dejected. I've heard everything from Ratna."

Sumant was befuddled by the strange happenings, the like of which one reads only in books of fiction. He mopped off Ratna's tears when she recovered from the initial shock. Then turning to Ramanand Mishra he said, "If you will kindly excuse me, my friends are waiting for me in the camp. We've to evolve a strategy. I'll see you by and by." As Sumant prepared to leave Sudhakar held him by the hand. "Not to fast, Sumant. The strategy has been worked out already. I'm coming straight from your camp. The Chipiatoli pond as well as the wells are being chlorinated. The District Board authorities have sent the scavenging them who are sweeping and disinfecting every hamlet. Every living person not so far vaccinated is being vaccinated by force. Resistance is crumbling. People are returning to their hamlets. If you like I'll accompany you to Bhuskaul where the camp is moving this evening." "O Sudhakar, you're great." Sumant clasped Sudhakar's hands and squeezed it tightly. Let's move on *via* the camp. So off they went along the dusty roads of Mahmuda to the village chaupal where Sumant had set up his camp. There they witnessed long lines of men, women and children receiving aid of sorts-medicines, clothing, packets of foodstuff and cash money for purchase of fuel and cereals. A sizeable amount of money had been sent to the camp by Ramanand Mishra through Sudhakar.

"Do you see these faces lit up with joy?" asked Sumant.

"Yes. It's like a new life, a re-birth after a great holocaust," said Sudhakar. "Life's a long series of accidents. More important is the determination. You and your men are the motive force or the life force for these dumb inhabitants in this part of the countryside." "No, no," said Sumant, "you're the harbinger of that spring, of that life rejuvenated."

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It was nearing mid-day when Sudhakar reached Babu Vishwanath Prasad's residence. Viswanathji had already reached home in a tum-tum and broken the news, which by any reckoning was the most astounding, of Sumant's return after years of absence. Shakuntala was keyed up by the impending visit of one dearest to her and did not know how to organise a reception. As Shakuntala opened the door pursuant to a knock the first person who met his eyes was Sudhakar. "*Bhabhi* (sister-inlaw):" he said, "I've brought the errant boy. Now hold him fast and don't let him escape." *Bhabhi*. The word had a magic incantation and struck the chords of Shakuntala's heart like a sweet cadence on a violencello. As Sudhakar was preparing to leave, Shakuntala held him by the hand and with a endearing smile said: "Now that you've called me your *bhabhi*, you're my *debar* (brother-in-law). You've to listen to my command. You'll stay for

lunch along with your errant friend, who has to tell us all about his peregrinations from the beginning to the end. Then turning towards Sumant, Shakuntala said: "One man gave me the mantra of social service. Another man showed me the way to effectuate that mantra. Do you know, Sumant, Sudhakar has brought about a revolution in this part of the land. Not only revolutionised but has revitalised the masses. In fact he has saved many a life, including mine, by insisting on vaccination before the epidemic broke out." "A vaccination which brought both of us on the brink of disaster," Sudhakar laughed and Sumant joined in the prevailing merriment.

The happiest person was Babu Vishwanath Prasad, who after a long time saw a radiant smile on the lips of his dearest daughter.

*

"It was the climacteric period of my life." Sumant was narrating his experience to Sudhakar and Shakuntala when they had assembled in the living room after a frugal lunch. "One word from his lips was enough to launch a thousand cohorts on the hazardous road to freedom. It was the word of Mahatma Gandhi. You're aware, Sudhakar, of the great upheaval of the late twenties and early thirties. Non-cooperation with the obdurate Raj was the trumpet call that echoed in the halls of our educational institutions. Thousands abandoned their studies, walked out of schools and colleges to join the peace brigades or in other words to become satyagrahis. We, however, had already completed our studies. Insofar as I was concerned, friends or rather the friends of my late father had suggested that I should go to England and sit for the I.C.S. My father had left a tidy sum which could see me through during my stay in London. Whether I could pass the Civil Service Examination was another matter. Possibly I could be called to the Bar at Lincoln's Inn. Then came the violent clashes with the British at different places in Bengal, United Provinces, and Punjab, the Chittagong Armoury Raid, the heroic exploits Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru, the revolutionary activities of the Hindustan Republican Party, and the wanton lathi charges on nationalist leaders. All such incidents led me to think and think profoundly about the ultimate destiny of the country. Would the spirit of violence ultimately triumph over all that is good in humanity? Would the spectre of violence so overshadow us that we should forget even the basic tenet of Buddhism—"Thou shall not kill." Would rationalisation give way to fanaticism? Would Mahatma Gandhi's call for a non-violent struggle end in nothingness? Why was it that Lala Lajpat Rai braved the police batons and suffered the fatal blow? Why was it that nationalist leaders like Motilal Nehru, Jawaharlal Nehru, J. M. Sen Gupta, Babu Rajendra Prasad

and Subhas Chandra Bose suffered incarceration in Indian jails? When my mind was in turmoil and the path was shrouded in darkness, I heard a clear call to my conscience. Something within me said, 'Go to Sabarmati Ashram'. My mind was made up. Darkness seemed to vanish and a streak of dawn lighted my path. But two things were important before I could embark on my mission. Mother and Ratna had to be settled. I entrusted the guardianship of my mother and sister to an uncle of mine who had rented an accommodation in Benaras. My father's Provident Fund and Gratuity could see them through difficult days and also leave a tidy sum for Ratna's marriage. But all my plans went awry, as I learnt later, leaving a trail of sufferings and destitution. But at that point of time sacrifices were called for. Mind you there were thousands like me who undertook untold hardships without looking back to their kith and kin. Freedom required sacrifices. The country was in need of non-violent satyagrahis. Before I finally left Benares, I felt an irresistible urge to meet you, Shakuntala, you being so receptive to my views. I had come to Waini Station by train. But the elements were against me. There was a torrential rain which delayed my movement. I was thoroughly drenched when I called at this house around mid-night. I'm sure you have told Sudhakar about this mid-night meeting." Shakuntala blushed while Sudhakar laughed. "I haven't told even my father," Shakuntala said coyly.

Sumant continued: "Well after an hour's stay or so here I took the road to Waini Station and from there went to Patna. From Patna I proceeded to Allahabad to have a glimpse of Anand Bhawan, the focal point of India's revolutionary struggle. Don't forget that it wasn't a revolution with the barrels of guns but a wholly non-violent struggle the pattern of which was perfected by Mahatma Gandhi during his fight against racialism in South Africa. I was fortunate to have a *darshan* (glimpse) of that darling jewel of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, and his daughter Indira, then about fifteen years old. Destiny took me to Bombay where I met a kind-hearted, accomplished Gujrati gentleman, Mr. Premdas Parmar who lived in a suburb of Ahmedabad. With Mr. Parmar I went to Ahmedabad. As good luck would have it, Mr. Parmar invited me to stay with him in his humble *kothi* (house). One day Mr. Parmar said to me. 'I belong to the depressed class but do you find it written on my face?' I was taken aback. Not that I'm a believer in casteism but the abrupt manner in which the topic was broached really surprised me. 'Mr. Verma,' Mr Parmar said to me, 'it's a noble idea of yours to serve your motherland to the best of your ability. But service doesn't mean that you should join some agitation, go to jail, and remain behind the bars for six months or so. That's not service. Rather it's a positive dis-service to your country. You are

educated. You've a Law Degree. You're young. Shouldn't you utilise your talents to protect the weak, to fight against oppression, to espouse the cause of the down-toodden, who are deprived of even their basic right to live in peace and without fear. In our part of the country untouchability is rampant. It's a disease which is sweeping the countryside in a virulent form. Go to any village in and around Sabarmati, you'll find that the untouchables, whom Mahatma Gandhi have termed as Harijans, aren't allowed to enter temples, draw water from wells used by caste Hindus, get their hair cut by caste Hindu barbers, enter *dhabas* (eating houses) which are frequented by caste Hindus. It's not for nothing that Mahatma Gandhi has launched a crusade against the discrimination between caste Hindus and untouchables."

Mr. Parmar took out an issue of *Harijan* dated the 11th February, 1933 and read what Mahatmaji had written therein."

"Untouchability as it is practised in Hinduism today is, in my opinion, a sin against God and man and is, therefore, like a poison slowly eating into the very vital of Hinduism. In my opinion it has no sanction whatsoever in the Hindu *shastras* taken as a whole... It has degraded both the untouchables and the touchables. It has stunted the growth of nearly 40 million human beings. They are denied even the ordinary amenities of life. The sooner, therefore, it is ended, the better for mankind in general."

Mr. Parmar wiped a tear from his eye. 'I become sentimental,' he said, 'whenever I hear of someone championing the cause of our depressed classes. Do you, Mr. Verma...' 'No, no, not Mr. Verma,' I protested. 'Call me only Sumant. I'm like your son.' 'Thank you, Sumant. You don't know what atrocities are committed on these Harijans and their counterparts, the Girijans. While the colonies of the former are interspersed with those of the caste Hindus, the latter have developed a culture of their own because of their habitation in remote and inaccessible places. But both are subjected to insidious exploitation. The lands belonging to Harijans are being encroached upon. They haven't the wherewithal to go to court to contest their claims. The lands belonging to Girijans are being alienated by big merchants and contractors and landlords belonging to upper castes. To whom shall they turn? Which lawyer will espouse their causes? There isn't any legal aid for Harijans and Girijans. Now Sumant, you're a lawyer. You should stand by me and fight against this systematic exploitation of the poor famished Harijan agriculturists? Don't you think it's a real service to your mother-land?"

What Mr. Parmar said went deep into my heart. The same evening

I attended a prayer meeting at Sabarmati Ashram, where the Mahatma stressed the importance of service to Harijans. He has expanded the idea in another issue of *Harijan*:

‘Harijan service is a religious obligation. There is no room in it for cunning. It has to be absolutely truthful and non-violent. Harijan means a man of God. If any body of people can be fitly described as man of God, they are surely these helpless, friendless and despised people.’

After this momentous soul-stirring speech of the Mahatma my mind was made up. I joined hands with Mr. Premdas Parmar and his select band of workers of the Harijan League to press for the betterment of the socio-economic condition of Harijans. But resistance from caste Hindus bordered on fanaticism. When we led a group of Harijans to enter a temple in a village, in the vicinity of Ahmedabad, a shower of bricks landed on us. As a result of a direct hit on the back of my head I fell down unconscious.’

“Oh, my God! How horrible!” Shakuntala shrieked.

“Your stars or rather Shakuntala Devi’s stars were very powerful and that’s why you’ve survived that ordeal,” Sudhakar said.

“No, it was the unmotivated grace of Lord Vishwanath which saved me. I had to be hospitalised for a week. Then Mr. Parmar took me home and after a brief period of convalescence he introduced me to a local lawyer to whom I rendered service for full one year. My legal acumen was greatly appreciated and the clients—mostly poor down-trodden Harijans—showered blessings on me and my seniors because we didn’t accept any fees for services rendered. This aroused the hostility of the upper classes who held out threats against me and my senior colleague, who himself was a Harijan. But I carried on against odds without any concern for my personal safety. But the situation became so desperate that my benefactor, Mr. Parmar, suggested that I might give up the voluntary work which I was performing, and return to my native place, where the condition of the Harijans was no less pathetic. He blessed me and held me to his chest. While parting he presented to me a small bronze replica of Dwarkadhis (Lord Krishna, the presiding deity of Dwarka). ‘May the Lord protect you always’ he said. ‘Serve your people to the best of your ability.’ It was a wrench, this parting from Mr. Parmar. But the suffering humanity is the same everywhere—whether in Ahmedabad or Patna.

From Ahmedabad to Patna. Then to Benaras. I went straight to my uncle’s house. To my utter surprise I was informed that my uncle had left

and his whereabouts were not known to his neighbours. The destitute mother and her daughter had taken shelter in some ashram, the location of which was not known to anyone. Then began my frantic search of ashrams or shelter houses to find out my missing mother and sister. Now Benaras is a city dotted with ashrams of every description in its narrow cobbled lanes. My search proved fruitless. One day while I sat on the steps of the Monicornica Ghat, a saffron-clad sadhu chanced to see me and enquired if he could be of any help to me. I told him my tale of woe. A light beamed in the eyes of the sadhu. He stepped forward and clasped me to his bosom. 'Beta!' he said, 'we've been waiting for you for a long time. Your mother and sister were staying in our ashram. But she lives separately. I can take you there. But 'I'm afraid your mother's condition is not too well.' I bowed down before the sadhu, with a silent prayer in my lips for the safety of my ailing mother. Traversing a mile through the serpentine lanes the stranger halted before a dilapidated building and asked me to go inside. The kind-hearted sadhu left as soon as I entered the semi-dark corridors leading to a room on the edge of the inner courtyard.

Two or three women were hurrying about and some one with a stethoscope around his neck came out of a room, after obviously examining a patient. Perhaps some one was seriously ill. I took courage and asked a woman who the patient was. 'Sarla Devi,' she said. 'She's on her death-bed pining for her son, Sumant.' Sumant! The word struck me like a hot iron. I trembled from head to foot and staggered into the room, where on a small cot lay an emaciated woman, palpably in the throes of great pain. A glance at her eyes was enough to convince me that I had chanced upon her, my mother, who was buffeted and tossed more by man's inhumanity than by fortune's caprices. I held my mother's feet and cried aloud, 'Look, Mother, Sumant has come.' There was still life left in her. She was in her senses. With her frail hand she gripped my face, and brought it closer to her mouth. Then she kissed my forehead. She gasped for breath as she said in a faint voice: 'Now I can die in peace. Find out your sister Ratna, who was entrusted to one Ram Das of Kalimata temple in Dighra. Your uncle has ruined me. He's decamped with all my savings. but he couldn't go far. He was killed by a running train. O Sumant! Find out Ratna and arrange for her marriage.' Dighra? Where's Dighra?' Mother couldn't answer. In the same evening she passed away. I performed her last rites on the bank of the Ganges. Then I left Benaras and returned to Patna, where our ancestral house still existed under the custody of one of my father's friends. I occupied a portion of the house and started my practice and undertaking in my spare time voluntary service for the uplift of the depressed classes and

relieving their sufferings. Our Social Service League has a number of volunteers—all dedicated workers endowed with a missionary zeal. When the news of the outbreak of epidemic in Waini and the peripheral villages appeared in the Press, our organisation deputed me here with a team of doctors and nurses. The thought of Ratna was uppermost in my mind, but in spite of patient and persistent inquiries I couldn't locate the place called Dighra. Now from Benaras to Bhuskaul village. Who could think of it? I'm amazed at the turn of events. That sadhu? How fortuitous was the chance meeting with him. And how extraordinary was the last meeting with my mother. How could I explain the chance meeting with your father, Shakuntala, on that eventful day, and the almost unbelievable meeting with my long-lost sister, Ratna, in the abode of Babu Ramanand Mishra. I'm convinced that there's a power, a supreme power that moulds our lives however we might, in our ignorance, question its existence."

Sumant paused. Both Shakuntala and Sudhakar were visibly moved and sat in silence. The gloom was broken as Babu Ramanand Mishra and Viswanath Prasad entered the room. Behind them were Sumitra Devi and Ratna. "My boy," Ramanand Mishra said, "you had a hectic tour. You should take a little rest. Here's Ratna now happily composed. Since you're Ratna's elder brother and guardian, I've to take your concurrence. We would like to make Ratna our daughter-in-law. She'll wed Sudhakar." This was the most delectable news that Sumant had ever heard. He embraced Ratna and kissed her forehead. "Your mother's blessings are with you, Ratna," he said. Then he touched Babu Ramanand Mishra's feet. "You're a saint and not an ordinary mortal," he said as Ramanand Mishra lifted him. Then he bowed before Sumitra Devi also. "But there's something more," Sumitra Devi said. "Here's Shakuntala, as dear to me as my own daughter, Sujata. I entrust her to your charge, Sumant." Babu Viswanath Prasad placed his hand on the heads of Sumant and Shakuntala as they bowed down to touch his feet.

"We'll solemnise the weddings in the month of Magh (corresponding to the month of January-February) in the coming year, 1934," Babu Ramanand Mishra said. Then as the ladies left the room, Babu Viswanath Prasad said to Sumant, "Son, now that your team has come to Bhuskaul village, I would suggest that you visit the adjoining village of Dighra also, which is the source of all infection." "Dighra?" Sumant expressed his surprise. "Why, do you know the place?" Viswanath Prasad asked. "The zemindar of that village Babu Ramdas himself fell a victim to the foul disease." "No," Sumant said, "but I heard my mother say that my sister was placed in the custody of one Ramdas, the administrator of a temple in Dighra." "Yes, he's the same man." Babu Ramanand Mishra

intervened. "Ratna was no doubt placed under his custody but her experiences were horrible." Then Ramanand Mishra recounted the travails of Ratna; how she was going to be sold as a bonded slave to the erstwhile zemindar of Dighra, Natwarlal; how Ratna sought shelter from Sumitra Devi; how Ramdas had fretted and fumed and demanded the return of Ratna; how he relinquished his claim over Ratna on receipt of cash money; and how splendidly Ratna had adjusted to the household, not only adjusted but had become an integral part of it; how with Shakuntala and Sudhakar Ratna was managing a primary school for village children. Her service during the epidemic won't be forgotten by the people of Mahmuda. Sudhakar and Shakuntala owe a great deal to Ratna, for, it was she who nursed them back to health after their recent illnesses.

"You're a noble person, Ramanandji," Sumant said, "I don't have words to adequately thank you for the help rendered to a poor destitute girl."

"Forget about it," Ramanand said. "When you visit Dighra you must ensure that the women-folk—Hindus and Muslims—are duly vaccinated. There's a great deal of allergy among the women-folk as regards vaccination. I hope you've women-volunteers also." Sumant nodded. Then he took leave of Babu Ramanand Mishra and Babu Viswanath Prasad and proceeded with Sudhakar to the camping site.

"What a fine youngman!" Ramanand commented.

"I entirely agree," Viswanath Babu said. "It's the blessing of the Goddess, the Mother Kali, who has brought the groom at my very door."

XXVII

THE MIRROR CRACKED

The year 1933 ended with agitations all over the country. There was a recrudescence of violence, notably in Bengal, and to cap it all grim forebodings were made by sooth-sayers about terrible happenings somewhere in India. An astrologer predicted, and strangely enough his predictions appeared in a Patna daily, that a catastrophe was going to strike the province on the 15th day of January 1934, the day when six planets would congregate. "What sort of catastrophe?", asked anxious readers. By way of amplification the astrologer predicted that there might be any of the following natural calamities: Famine, flood, war, epidemic, or earthquake.

The Babus of Naulakha at their evening gatherings talked about the prophecy. "Humbug!" pooh-poohed Banwari Babu, the purveyor of all local news. "It's a dream of a mad man suffering from insomnia," he said to his colleagues at the bridge table. "A war can't take place all of a sudden and winter isn't the proper month for floods and epidemics. We already had one epidemic in September last, the epidemic of small pox," Baijnath Babu observed. "What about famine?" queried Banarsi Prasad. "Famine?" Baijnath Babu laughed heartily. "Are you experiencing any difficulty in getting your provisions from the Cooperative Store," he asked jocularly. "But one imponderable is left, I mean earthquake," Radhika Babu the fourth player on the bridge table, timidly observed. "Yes, there's the rub," Baijnath Babu said. "Who knows what's happening within the bowels of the mother earth? Who knows whether Mt. Etna would suddenly erupt or not? But there's one comforting factor. The Indo-Gangetic region isn't in the seismic zone." "Hang it all," Banwari Babu interrupted while shuffling cards. "You or I can't avert a catastrophe. Let it come when it will. Why spoil a pleasant evening, brother?" So the Babus forgot all about the prophesies and picked up their cards almost mechanically.

Suddenly a sort of fiendish laughter grated on their ears. "That's Foto Babu," Baijnath Babu said. "His wits have gone haywire since his wife died or rather committed suicide by hanging. He walks about in tattered clothes holding a mirror to his face. What he sees therein God alone knows."

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Astounding news came to the effect that the District Magistrate of Midnapur had been shot dead by so-called terrorists and among those

arrested was a boy from Waini. The Babus, loyalists to the core, were terribly scared. Some of them had grown-up sons or brothers studying in colleges outside Waini. If they came under the influence of terrorists and indulged in violence then it meant their ruin and devastation. The father of any boy, involved in any activity of a political nature, was liable to immediate dismissal. But blood in a youth burned furiously and no youngman of the time was impervious to the seething turmoil that was shaking the country from end to end. "A gigantic shake-up. That's what's happening in the country," Shibdas confided to Mejoma. "I hope Benu wouldn't participate in strikes, or picketing as that would mean the end of my career. We would have to starve."

But men don't have control over events. Rather it's the event which shapes the man. Sitanath Mishra, the new Headmaster of Waini High School, constantly harangued his boys about the dangers inherent in participation in political meetings or strikes or picketing in Waini or elsewhere. "Your career will be finished. You'll not only be rusticated but put behind the bars. Your parents or guardians would forfeit their jobs. So beware. Tread carefully, cautiously. Don't pay any heed to agitators outside the school."

Vidyanath Mishra, son of Sitanath Mishra, was Benu's class-mate. They liked each other's company. While Sitanath Mishra was haranguing on the loyalist maxims at school, his son Vidyanath was chalking out the details of a non-violent struggle in the Waini Bazar. None but Benu knew about his plans. "We'll do a silent picketing before the toddy shop in Waini," Vidyanath said to Benu. "Haven't Mahatma Gandhi blessed peaceful non-cooperation activities? It's a sin to allow a poor villager to squander his hard-earned money on liquor and narcotics," Benu was enthused. "It's a noble cause not connected with political activities," he said. Came a Sunday. Benu and Vidyanath stood before a toddy shop. One or two buyers, habitual boozers, tossed away the extended arms of two teenagers and forced their entry inside. Then more men came. Vidyanath lay down on the path and asked Benu to do the same. Soon a crowd gathered to witness the *tamasha*. "Grand," said a spectator. "Well done," said another. A few patriotic youngmen followed the example of Benu and Vidyanath and completely barred the entry of all prospective buyers inside the toddy shop. Then what followed was as sudden as it was alarming. A posse of policemen pounced upon the picketeers and beat them with their batons. The crowd dispersed in panic. In the melee Benu received a few blows on his back, while Vidyanath had a bruised head. Luckily none was arrested. For the picketing was by and large peaceful.

That evening Benu was caught by his Mejoma as he was trying to sneak into the house with a torn shirt. "What's happened?" Mejoma growled as she held Benu by the neck. "Nothing. There's a fight among the boys," Benu said laconically. But the truth was out. Shibdas said sternly to Benu: "You'll have to go to Muzaffarpur and prepare there for the ensuing Matriculation Examination. Khokun will look after you. While I admire your courage I don't condone your activities. My job would be at a stake."

And Vidyathath? The loyal Headmaster, overcome with fierce indignation, lashed at his own son with the very cane which he wielded so often in the school. Vidyathath didn't come to school any more. Much later Benu learnt that Vidyathath had succumbed to a bullet fired by a *gora* sahib at a crowd in Darbhanga town.

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Babu Ramanand Mishra proceeded to Darbhanga early in January along with Sumitra and Sujata. Brisk preparations were on for the marriage of Sudhakar with Ratna at Patna on the twenty first day of January. The marriage of Shakuntala with Sumant was slated for the sixteenth day of January at Muzaffarpur. Sudhakar's marriage was to be a simple affair without any show and ostentation. True to his principles, Ramanand Mishra had declined to accept any dowry. The bridal ornaments would all be provided by Sumitra Devi.

At Patna, Sumant with the help of an aunt made the necessary purchases for the bridal attire. Those were the days of bliss for Ratna. Even in her moments of happiness she couldn't help shedding tear for her mother who would not be present to give her away in marriage.

Babu Viswanath Prasad had accepted the invitation of his brother, in-law, Babu Chandrika Prasad, to celebrate the marriage of Shakuntala from Muzaffarpur. Chandrika Babu had a spacious double-storeyed house in Motijheel and there was no dearth of accommodation. A cosy room in the first floor was kept ready for the exclusive use of Babu Viswanath Prasad. The day of the marriage was fixed for the sixteenth of January. Sumant and his friends and relations would come to Muzaffarpur on the morning of the fifteenth. A bungalow at Islampur in Muzaffarpur was kept reserved for the marriage party. As the day of marriage appeared Shakuntala felt an uneasy qualm. Her happiness was tempered by uncanny feelings. A sort of fear gripped her. While looking at her mother's portrait Shakuntala felt as if her mother's soul was flitting across the room, a sort of floating vapour which cannot be seen but felt; long filaments or blobs of ethereal cellular substances, now to the right, now to the left. She rubbed her eyes but the uncanny presence persisted.

"Mother!" Give me your blessings for the auspicious day," Shakuntala prayed with eyes closed and then went upstairs to look up her father.

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At the rented *khapra* (tiled) house of brother Khokun in Muzaffarpur's Dewan Road, Benu struggled with his books in preparation for the ensuing Matriculation Examination, which was scheduled to take place in February, 1934. About thirty-five days or so remained. But the atmosphere around Dewan Road was stifling. The slush and mud and the filth of the open drains running through the length of the road was a happy breeding ground of mosquitoes. Rows of houses on both sides of the road did not allow sun-light to percolate through the small apertures which were euphemistically termed as windows. The *palki-gharies* (box-type closed horse-drawn carriages) rattled through the uneven road while *thelas* (push carts) laden with merchandise were driven across nonchalantly by sturdy labourers through a herd of foraging cows towards Kalyani bazar. The noise generated by various kinds of vehicles was extremely nerve-racking. At a stone's throw from his house was the level-crossing at Amgola where Benu used to stand in the evenings and see giant engines thunder past on sleek railway tracks to Silhout, Dholi and Pusa Road. Benu loved to look wistfully at the passing trains and long to be once more in the place which he knew ever since his birth. He pined for the open expanses of Waini, the lush green meadows of Mahmuda and the tall and sturdy *shisam* trees which overlooked the sprawling Bairia Dhaf. He longed to see his nephews, Babla and Kamal, who he thought, must be missing him too. Beyond Amgola Benu saw the double-storeyed house which his father had built and fondly named as the "New House". But of what use was that structure of bricks and mortar when the family did not live there at all after his father's death? At least Benu did not live there. Benu had learnt from his Dada, Shibdas, that during his father's time Rabindranath Tagore had visited that house. Being a respected and popular zemindar of Muzaffarpur, his father was the first signatory to a public address presented to Poet Tagore in 1911, that is two years before the poet was awarded the Nobel prize for literature. Babu Sarat Chandra Chakravarty, husband of poet Rabindarnath's daughter, Madhurilata, was a great friend of his father. Benu had heard that Madhurilata, after her marriage, used to come to their house to play with his elder sisters. Even the novelist Sarat Chandra Chatterjee had visited the New House and taken part in musical soirees. That New House, Benu wondered, was an accursed house. It harboured memories of yore in every brick and every wall which once echoed with gaiety and laughter. But now it was a mansion given out on rent and no member of the family lived in it.

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"You shouldn't have sent Benu to Muzaffarpur," Suprava said to Shibdas. After all Benu didn't do anything wrong. There wasn't any police case against him. Mother has gone to Calcutta not because of the reported illness of her brother, but because she couldn't endure the absence of Benu. Poor boy! He must be feeling home-sick. Khokun goes to office at nine, and whole day Benu has to stay alone and eat whatever is dished out by the part-time cook. I'm afraid Benu wouldn't succeed in his examination. And look at the children. They always ask: 'When is Chotka coming back?' Shibdas looked at Suprava. He felt guilty, terribly guilty. With Mejoma away to Calcutta and Benu sent away to Muzaffarpur, he suddenly found the house was extraordinarily quiet. What Suprava said to him hit him like a nail. What a shameless fool he was to send away his brother to a drab and dreary household, looked after by a hired hand. What prospect was there for Benu to pass his examination under such difficult circumstances. "Well, I'll go to Muzaffarpur this week-end to bring Benu back home." Shibdas said.

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Suddenly there was a hilarious chorus from Babla and Kajal. "Chotka has come, Chotka has come," they shouted. And sure enough there was Benu with his trunk of books and clothes standing in the living room. Shibdas rushed out and hugged Benu as the latter bowed down to touch his feet. Suprava wiped her tears with the corner of her sari.

*

Priyaranjan Sen was a young science graduate of Calcutta University. Normally a resident of Shillong, he used to visit his brother, who was an employee in the Institute. Priyaranjan plagued by an undiagnosed disease, loved to escape from the biting cold of Khasi and Jaintia Hills of Assam, and visit Waini in winter to recoup his shattered health. Usually jovial and playful in the company of young boys, Priyaranjan would sometimes relapse into sullenness and morbidity. Then one day he would spit blood and be confined to bed for several days. While the symptoms were familiar, the cause of haemoptysis could not be diagnosed. Even the best Calcutta doctors could not provide a curative treatment. So Priyaranjan alternated between normality and abnormality. But he carried on bravely, never despairing, never complaining. To forget his worries Priyaranjan gathered around him a group of boys preparing for the matriculation examination and taught them mathematics. Among this group was Benu to whom mathematics was a bug-bear. Much of what Priyaranjan taught was incomprehensible to Benu, but his occasional anecdotes about life in

distant Shillong, the torrential rains, the periodic earthquakes, the jungle, the rhino and the leeches greatly interested him.

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Morning of 15th January, 1934. Outside the Babu quarters life flowed on as usual. There was no panic or nervousness, notwithstanding the prediction of a catastrophe. The Babus went to their offices as usual. The boys walked or cycled to the Waini school. The forenoon was unusually cold. A breeze came from the direction of the Bairia Dhaf. The easterly wind was always cold. It presaged winter rains. But by mid-day it warmed up. The women-folk were having their mid-day siesta. Benu and his friends—Bhute and Desho—had assembled in Priyaranjan's quarters to have their daily lessons in mathematics.

Time was 2 P.M. Suddenly the wind dropped. The birds ceased chirping. The dogs wailed. The sun was enveloped by a cloud and a sudden darkness descended at 2.10 P.M. Suddenly the cot trembled. "Get out everybody?" shouted Priyaranjan and pulled Benu who was seating next to him. Like an arrow flung from a strung bow, Benu and his friends darted out. A deep rumbling sound resembling the roar of a hundred lions or the thunderous booming of cannons from the nether world, followed by terrific vibrations of the earth's crust left every body dazed and speechless. They stood under the towering *sisham* trees which swayed and bent with every vibration of the mother earth. "Run to the playground," Priyaranjan cried out. Benu and his friends rushed to the adjoining play-ground near the hostel, But the quake never seemed to cease. Moments seemed eternal. The earth's crust cracked and closed, cracked like furrows on a ploughed field, and then through fissures spouted columns of sulphurous water inundating a vast area of the grassy ground. There was water everywhere. It appeared to Benu as if *Pralaya* (Doomsday) had come to engulf the puny creatures in the primordial sea which knew no beginning, no end. For full two minutes they suffered the unheralded, unforeseen orgy of Nature's wrath, and when the quake ceased they looked around. The brick-built sturdy students' hostel had cracked into two. It looked as if a hefty giant had applied a mighty scissor to tear the structure in two dissimilar shapes.

"Run to your house," shouted Priyaranjan. Benu staggered to his feet. So did Bhute and Desho. Like one drunk, Benu swayed as he walked, trembling from head to feet. Everybody ran. Some ran to the left, some to the right. Where they ran Benu could not guess. But he heard the frantic cries of "Bachao, Bachao" (save, save). Benu neared his quarter but had not the courage to enter into it. He knew that two of his sister-in-laws were inside, but where they could be he could not tell. Like a

person dazed, Benu walked in the direction of the Naulakha. Then he saw his Dada hurrying home holding the hands of Babla and Kamal. "Where're you going, Benu? Come home quickly," Shibdas said as he caught hold of Benu's hands. Benu followed him mechanically. In the meantime other Babus of Naulakha were running towards their quarters gripped by panic. Some walked on foot. Some were on cycles. But all sped homewards where their family members must have spent agonising moments since the terrifying tremors of the ground under their feet. "I left my ailing wife at home. God knows what has happened to her," Tribeni Babu muttered as he overtook Shibdas and ran towards his quarter. "Good luck to you," Shibdas shouted as he walked homewards with Babla, Benu and Kamal. "Thank God! The quarters haven't collapsed," Jogin Babu uttered in a tremulous voice. He was the immediate neighbour of Shibdas.

"Ha-Ha-Ha." Someone came running on the road laughing and prancing. The matted hair, the bearded face, the loose shaggy shirt and the baggy pyjama unmistakably revealed the identity of the demented reveller. Foto Babu. Now stark mad. On one hand he held an empty earthen pot and on another a broken mirror. Foto Babu laughed and cried. His laughter was sinister; his cries were incoherent. He danced as he babbled: "They won't give a drop, no. No money, no tari. Sab saleh sooar ke bache (all bloody sons of swine). Rightly served. Go and drink. Tomorrow you won't. It's cracked. The mirror has cracked. Go and see. The Naulakha was cracked like this mirror on my hand. Ha-Ha-Ha!" Foto Babu darted down the road towards the river front.

Shibdas entered his house followed by Benu, Babla and Kamal. Babla shouted for his mother. So did Kamal. Where was she? Shibdas pushed the door. It was open. He came to the courtyard. The back-door was open. None was inside. A sudden fear gripped him. "Suprova", "Suprova", he shouted. Then walking out of the back-door he found Suprova and his brother's wife, Vimla, standing on the road. The housewives of the adjoining quarters had huddled together, forsaking the safety of the house which had been their shelter so long. Babla and Kamal ran to their mother and brought her inside. Benu held the hands of his sister-in-law, Vimla, and walked inside the house. Outwardly the house was intact but as he stepped into the bed-room Shibdas stared at the ceiling. It had split revealing the open sky. The earthquake had snapped the roof. Plasters and stones had tumbled on the floor as if in a deluge. There were cracks on the walls and on the floor. And as Shibdas looked behind he saw the pale, haggard face of his wife. The mirror had cracked.

As darkness descended on Waini more tremors were felt and all ran out helter skelter. A biting cold made the women and the children to huddle together in the open. None dared to stay inside. Shibdas locked his house and took shelter in his uncle's quarter which was intact. Benu's uncle Satish Babu was the father of cousins Bowa and Panna. A fire was lit and all members of the family sat around it to warm themselves in the bitter January cold. It seemed Nature had also conspired to inflict unimaginable hardships to the Babus and their families. Periodic shocks continued. First the rumbling noise. Then the rattle. This led to a hectic rush to the open by all the inmates. Night was spent without even a wink of sleep.

The magnitude of the damage was known on the following morning. The south-eastern block of the Institute had collapsed. Right through the building ran a deep fissure, about a foot wide, throwing up rubbles and water from the bowels of the earth. The mighty structure that was Naulakha had tilted with chasms on the floors. It was a miracle that no life was lost.

Director Shawcross made a tour of the entire Institute campus. He visited every locality and sympathised with the Babus whose quarters had been damaged or who had suffered injuries. With an alacrity and promptness, the characteristic of a true-bred British saheb, Shawcross ordered the construction of two hundred huts on the play ground adjoining the quarters. And pending the completion of these huts, he ordered the setting up of tents for each family on an emergency basis. A city of tents grew up overnight. And within a month arose rows of bamboo and straw huts where the Babus could sleep in comfort without the spectre of an earthquake plaguing their minds. A first hand report of the damage was telegraphed by Mr. Shawcross to New Delhi.

16th January, 1934. By afternoon came the first newspapers to Waini—two from Patna and one from Calcutta. Since the rail-lines had been disrupted they had to be transported partly by rail/steamer and partly by road. The banner headlines for the first time brought home to the residents of Waini the magnitude of the damage. "A holocaust", an "upheaval", said the papers. Communication between Muzaffarpur and Darbhanga had been disrupted with the rail-lines turned upside down. Hundreds of buildings had collapsed in Muzaffarpur town. An eminent doctor had been buried under the debris. A famous Bengali authoress tenanted a double-storeyed house in Amgola had sustained serious hip injuries and a grand-daughter of hers was killed as a portion of the first floor had tumbled down upon them during their attempted escape. The Purani Bazar had been razed to the ground. Some fifty thousand people,

according to unofficial reports, had either perished or received serious injuries. Monghyr town had suffered serious damage. Houses in Purab Sarai had crumbled like a pack of cards and buried thousands of people, so the papers said. News from Darbhanga and Madhubani were equally alarming. In Laheriasarai hundreds of buildings had collapsed. With railway lines between Samastipur and Barauni disrupted there was no possibility of relief being sent there expeditiously. The earthquake shocks were felt as far as Lahore on the west and Calcutta on the east. Patna was rocked too but the damage there was minimal. The epicentre of the earthquake was believed to be in the Himalayan range bordering Nepal.

India and the world woke up to the gravity of the situation which confronted the province of Bihar as details of the grim tragedy appeared in the newspapers with appalling pictures of ruin and devastation. The All-India Congress Committee organised relief operations on a mass scale. Voluntary organisations like Ramakrishna Mission, Marwari Relief Society and the Servants of India Society sent teams of volunteers to render on-the-spot assistance to the afflicted people. Squads of doctors from Patna, Cuttack, Calcutta and Lucknow rushed with life-saving drugs. Emergency camps were set up to attend to the wounded and disabled. Thousands of students from Patna and other cities fanned out to the districts to organise relief work. Babu Rajendra Prasad, Mrs. Sucheta Kripalani, Babu Srikrishna Sinha and others walked on foot, braving the rigours of the winter and hazards of epidemic. They toured the worst-affected areas in all the quake-affected towns of Bihar supervising relief work and condoling with the relatives of the dead and wounded. Their door-to-door *padajatra* (journey on foot) had a sobering effect on the distraught, quake-affected people of Bihar. In a calamity like this people forgot their petty differences, based on considerations of castes, creed and religion. Bihar was a limb of India and so long as Bihar suffered India suffered too. Never before was the innate unity in diversity of the country more amply demonstrated than during the Bihar earthquake of 1934.

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At Muzaffarpur on that fateful day of 15th January, 1934, Sumant and the members of marriage party had taken up their abode on a two storeyed house in Islampur, contiguous to Motijheel. After a sumptuous lunch some had retired for a much-needed rest. Some members of the marriage party had gone out to Saraiyaganj to make purchases. Sumant had an appointment to keep. Sudhakar, his would be brother-in-law, was arriving by the 2 o' clock train to Muzaffarpur from Waini. Sumant was in a hurry to reach the station well before the train arrived.

And Shakuntala? She had gone upstairs to her father on the first floor. Downstairs in the living room Kampta had assembled the items which he had purchased for his sister's marriage. Babu Chandrika Prasad and his wife, Sushila, were in a happy mood inspecting and approving the choice of Kampta. Outside a decorative *pandal* was being erected for the marriage to be held on the following morning. Babu Viswanath Prasad was sharing in the prevailing gaiety.

Sudhakar's train came punctually at 2 P.M. Scarcely had the two friends come out of the platform when the ground shook under their feet. Amid agonising cries of women and children, Sumant and Sudhakar stood speechless for a moment. Then they tore apart and rushed towards a school building which had collapsed. In a split second Sumant caught hold of a few persons and flung himself on the pile of rubbles, digging, extracting until his arms ached. Directing Sudhakar to look after the family of Viswanath Babu, Sumant frantically searched for bodies under the debris. More men joined the search, Bleeding bodies were extracted, some dead, some living. Within thirty minutes they had unearthed as many as ten bodies—all suffering from shock and exhaustion. "A doctor, a doctor. Call a doctor," shouted Sumant. Amitabha Banerjee, a final year student in Patna Medical college, who lived in Islampur, realised the gravity of the situation as the school building collapsed. With his medical kit he rushed to the spot and set about his work like a seasoned practitioner. He sent those seriously wounded on cots and improvised stretchers to Sadar Hospital, which was close by, and attended to the not-so-serious patients, stitching, dressing, wherever needed. "God has sent you in the right time," said Sumant and then moved on towards Islampur. By that time more men had come to render succour.

Shakuntala had hardly descended the steps when the building shook. A crust of bricks and mortar fell on her body rendering her semi-conscious. How long she remained in that condition she did not know. She could breathe through a chink in the mass of rubble engulfing her. Her head was in shambles. Blood was trickling down her cheeks. Sudhakar worked furiously to clear the rubble with the aid of Kampta and Chandrika Prasad. What the noise was about, Shakuntala wondered. Then a loud wail came to her ears: "They're gone. All gone. All're buried in Islampur house." Some one mentioned Sumant's name. And all the time Sudhakar used the shovel to clear the debris, shouting Shakuntala's name. "What's the use. Let me die. Sumant's gone. And father?" Shakuntala remembered her father. How was he? With one massive effort Shakuntala thrust aside the rubble and lifted her arm through the aperture. "She's living, she's living," shouted Sudhakar and with one supreme effort shuffled off the enveloping mound of earth and

bricks and brought out the battered and unconscious Shakuntala. They sprinkled cold water on her face, and head. Cotton bandages were applied to her bleeding forehead. She opened her eyes and saw Sudhakar as he bent over her. "Sudhakar," she asked feebly, "how's my father?" and then swooned. The body of Babu Viswanath Prasad was buried under the heaps of stones and rubbles as the first floor collapsed on the floor below. His death was instantaneous.

A frenzied cry bordering on hysteria greeted Shakuntala's ears a little later. "He's alive. He's alive. Sumant is alive? Jai Baba Garib Nath." Glory to Lord Shiva cries rent the air.

*

Rail communication between Samastipur and Muzaffarpur having been snapped, the only source of news was the telegraph office. And the news that came over the wire was horrendous. Babu Ramanand Mishra, who had planned to attend Shakuntala's marriage on the 16th by proceeding to Muzaffarpur by train, was flabbergasted to hear about the ravages of the earthquake. He was in Darbhanga with Sumitra and Sujata. Darbhanga town was also affected but the damage was not as extensive as in Muzaffarpur town. Unable to hear anything from Sudhakar, who was due to attend Shakuntala's marriage—now doubtless gone awry—Ramanand sent an express telegram to Sudhakar care Chandrika Prasad, zemindar of Bela road in Muzaffarpur town. The reply that came in the following morning, that is the 17th, left him utterly dazed. The telegram read:

"Lost Babu Viswanath Prasad. Shakuntala saved. Sumant safe. Marriage postponed indefinitely.—Sudhakar."

The railway communications having been restored on the fourth day, Ramanand and Sumitra took the first available train for Waini. Sujata remained in the custody of her grand-mother. "A noble man has passed away," Ramanand said to Sumitra as they neared Mahmuda. "I feel lonely, utterly lonely."

For six consecutive days tremors of varying intensity were experienced by the residents of Naulakha. Braving the biting January cold they stayed in tents, their temporary shelters. People talked in hushed silence about the future of Naulakha. The damage to the building was so extensive that a huge expenditure running into crores would have to be spent to repair and renovate it.

*

The immediate concern of Shibdas was the lack of information about his brothers-Mona, Sine and Khokun. What happened to them? Were they safe? Days of worry made him a sick man. All sorts of rumours began to float from mouth to mouth. They said Darbhanga town was in shambles. Monghyr, where Mona worked, was a heap of rubbles. When the Naulakha residents were at the end of the tether came an alarming news *via* the post office that a fierce tornado was approaching from the west. Some one cried out, "Tornado. Tornado. Lie low. Hold on to the tents and say Ram Ram." A chill went through the spines as a sudden panic gripped the men and women of Naulakha.

Priyaranjan seemed unconcerned. He saw Benu moving nervously and caught hold of him. "Tell me, Benu, whether the speed of the tornado is faster or slower than the telegram?" Priyaranjan was right. Nothing happened. The Babus cursed the rumour-mongers for the false alarm.

Although the tornado did not come, a torrent of joy overwhelmed Shibdas as the post-man delivered to him a telegram which read: "All safe. Mona." "Thank God. Thank God." Shibdas muttered as tears rolled down his cheeks. Those were the tears of joy and thankfulness to the Divine being. Before Shibdas could compose himself and convey the good tidings to Suprova, Benu rushed to his bed-side in the tent and shouted: "They're coming; they're coming on cycles." Shibdas sprang to his feet and looked towards the Burra Babu's quarters some furlongs away. Sure enough two cyclists were pedalling along the gravel pathway towards the make-shift houses of tents. Unmistakably they were his brother Sine and cousin Bowa cycling all the way from Muzaffarpur to Naulakha, a distance of 22 miles. The scene that Benu witnessed was so touching that it remained etched in his mind in some indelible colour. A fond mother hugged and kissed Bowa and shed tears of joy. An affectionate brother, his Dada, hugged his younger brother, Sine, and cried like a child. Scenes like this were rarely to be seen. It seemed as if the mist had cleared and the bright sun had re-appeared in all its effulgence. When emotions subsided, Shibdas asked Sine about the welfare of Khokun and other relations at Muzaffarpur. "All are safe except the old mother of Haru Babu who was buried under the debris of the house which collapsed," said Sine.

"And our house in Amgola?" Shibdas asked.

"That accursed house has collapsed claiming a life."

"And the zemindar's house in Kalyani Bazar?"

"That haunted house's gone, reduced to rubbles."

Shibdas remained speechless for a moment and then shouted: "Suprova! Suprova! Do you hear? Our zemindar's house's gone; it's reduced to rubbles. At long last the curse on our distant ancestor, Ramapati, has kissed the dust. Look Benu, the last vestige of zemindari has gone. We'll build. We'll build again with our own blood and sweat." Never before had Benu seen such determination on his brother's face.

*

They had assembled at Muzaffarpur station. Babu Chandrika Prasad and his wife Sushila, Kampta, Shakuntala, Sudhakar and Sumant. The cremation of Babu Vishwanath Prasad had taken place three days earlier on the bank of the Burhi Gandak at Akhouria Ghat. The remaining rites were to be performed in Shakuntala's native Bhuskaul. A disconsolate Shakuntala was being consoled by Kampta.

"Sudhakar," Sumant said, "Shakuntala needs your assistance in this most difficult period of her life. I'll send Ratna to her. She may be of some help to her."

"What about you?"

"My work is still unfinished. Four of my comrades have perished. I'll go back to Patna for a short period and then come back. My work lies here—in this ravaged town of Muzaffarpur. God willing we'll meet soon."

The train was about to take off. Sudhakar, Shakuntala and Kampta boarded the train. Shakuntala looked at Sumant through her tears. Sumant waved and then hastily took leave of Babu Chandrika Prasad and his wife.

He had a long way to go down the dusty road to Islampur.

After the obligatory post-funeral rites were performed, Babu Ramanand Mishra said to Shakuntala:

"Daughter! You've lost a father and I a dear friend. The void can't be filled up. But this is the way of life. We've to be strong and do our allotted work. Look upon me as your father and Sumitra as your mother. This is your house. Your father has lived here and your mother too. Don't abandon it. You won't be friendless. With Ratna staying with you, you won't feel alone. And of course Sudhakar will look after you always. For a year you've to bide in patience—that's the mourning period prescribed by scriptures—and after that you'll have your own house. And till then Ratna's marriage also stands deferred."

Babu Ramanand Mishra paused for a moment. He placed his hand lightly on Shakuntala's head and said:

"There's a beginning and an end. From the cradle to the grave we march on. More important is the way we tread on this planet of ours. It's only work for your people which gives a meaning and substance to your life and living."

Ramanand took Shakuntala to the outer verandah where an astonishing sight greeted her eyes. Dark skinny figures of men with bare bodies and slim, shrunken women with veils drawn, and emaciated children dressed only in tunics sat patiently under the *jamun* tree to have a *darshan* of the lady of the house and offer their condolences, in muffled voices, in her recent bereavement. "Look, Shakuntala," Babu Ramanand Mishra said, "these are your people of Bhuskaul. There are Harijans, Muslims and Brahmins. A calamity is a great leveller. All've assembled here forgetting their barriers or caste or religion."

Shakuntala couldn't utter a word. She only folded her hands in salutation and then hurriedly withdrew to her room where Sumitra Devi encased her in motherly arms.

Mysteriously the earthquake had spared the mud huts and the pucca brick-built houses in Waini and peripheral villages. The village wells in Mahmuda had choked with silt and sand and the caste Hindus had perforce to draw water from the wells reserved for Harijans.

*

Even in the most painful circumstances some events do happen which go to mitigate the sufferings and reveal the many-coloured splendours of life. Tears and laughter are so closely intermingled that a *homo sapien* can at best be described as an amalgam of diverse sentiments and emotions, similar and dissimilar. So when Naulakha residents switched on from tents to thatched hamlets, which provided a poor protection against the rising summer heat, and pined for the cool comfort of their pucca houses, still under repair, a thin speck, no bigger than a bird, suddenly appeared in the clear blue sky over the Naulakha pologround. The speck became bigger and bigger and most surprisingly emitted a drone, which at first very faint, gradually became more audible, more persistent, and to the surprise of onlookers, turned, twisted and circled.

"A plane! A plane!" shouted several voices in unison. The ejaculations were taken up by others, until the whole community of hut-dwellers—the Babus, their wives, children—all gathered in the open fields with eyes

turned to the extra-terrestrial object. Never before had the Naulakha residents seen a plane. So when the flying object turned towards Waini school, all the old and the young, the able and the infirm, little boys and girls ran merrily clapping and lisping "The Plane. The Plane." Priyaranjan forgot his pulmonary ailment and ran. Benu ran. Desho ran. And in fact, all the residents, barring the women-folk, followed the path of the plane. Luckily for them the object landed on the soft ground near the Post Office, a good three miles away from the quarters, and the viewers had the satisfaction of first ever view of a flying machine. "Look, it's a two-seater," Desho said. "And there're two *gora* sahebs in it," Benu added. And indeed there were two passengers—both Britishers. The plane belonged to Fair Weathers Company, Muzaffarpur, and the flight, ruefully curtailed, was a practice flight. After refuelling, the plane took off in the direction of Dholi, to the merriment of the onlookers.

That same evening Priyaranjan complained of a pain in chest. And then blood came out from ruptured vessels. Before morning Priyaranjan passed away as silently as he had come to the Naulakha complex.

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From the trend of discussions in the Central Legislative Assembly in New Delhi, it became clear to all that the Naulakha would be dismantled. The Government announced in the course of the debate that the earthquake of January 1934 had damaged the Imperial Agricultural Research Institute to such a extent that repairs, at the existing cost, would cost a fabulous sum of money, which would be more than the construction of a new building. Following the recommendations of an expert body Government decided to transfer the Institute to New Delhi and to locate it a place which could be in the proximity of the villages as well as the Central Secretariat.

News of the transfer of the Institute came like a wild fire. Parmanand Babu, who worked unobtrusively—almost to the point of self-effacement—behind the long rows of files in the Record Room, blurted out: "I'm not going to Delhi, come that may. I'm seeking voluntary retirement." By August the order to send an advance party to Delhi was issued. This party was to include the Superintendent, the Accountant, the Head Assistant and twenty other staff.

Among the listed personnel was Shibdas. The transfer was to be completed by 15th October, 1934.

*

In the verandah of his three-roomed quarter, opposite the P.W.D. bungalow, sat Shibdas on a reclining chair, his handsome face wrapped in sorrow, while on the steps sat Mejoma holding a palmyra fan to ward off mosquitoes. Babla and Kamal were at their studies. Suprova was in the kitchen. Benu who failed in the May 1934 examination was preparing for the school test to be held in December, 1934.

"Mejoma," said Shibdas, "the order has come. I've to move to Delhi. What'll happen?"

"Nothing will happen," Mejoma said, "If others can go you too can go."

"But Delhi is so far away."

"So what? You'll be used to the place once you go there," Mejoma said re-assuringly.

"But leaving everybody behind. I mean Benu, Mona, Sine and Khokun."

"They've grown up. They'll look after themselves," Mejoma said.

"But I've a queer sort of feeling, a nagging thought that I may never return to my home."

"Have faith in God. Things will be alright," Mejoma said offering silent prayers in her mind for the safety of Shibdas.

It was decided that Benu would stay till December with his uncle in Naulakha and after his Test would go to Muzaffarpur, where his brother Khokun had built a semi-permanent structure. Mejoma would stay in Muzaffarpur and come to Delhi after things had stabilised. So from September onwards Shibdas started despatching his household goods to Muzaffarpur. He did not forget to transfer even his favourite rose plants. By September end the establishment had been wound up. Then in the first week of October Shibdas made farewell calls on his colleagues who gave him a hearty send-off. Among the callers at his residence to bid farewell was Babu Ramanand Mishra of Mahmuda.

At the time of departure by the Bettiah brake, the horse-drawn carriage provided by the Estate Office, to the station a crowd of well-wishers had assembled to wish him God-speed. Casting a last long lingering look at the three-roomed quarter which had sheltered his father, mother, sisters and brothers and his own children for a period of well over twenty years, Shibdas could hardly restrain the tears which welled up in

his eyes. Hurriedly he mounted the carriage which moved on at a brisk pace. The *tagar* trees, planted a quarter of a century back by his father at the entrance to his quarter, faded from view as the Bettiah brake took a sharp turn to the left. "Farewell Waini. Farewell. I may not see you again," Shibdas kept repeating the words in his mind as the carriage rolled on.

*

Two months later Benu completed his Test examination and was duly sent up for the ensuing Matriculation examination. Pandit Sitanath Mishra congratulated Benu on topping the list of successful candidates. "I hope, Benu, you'll win laurels in later years and bring credit to your *alma mater*." Benu was overwhelmed by a deep emotion. He bent down and touched the feet of Pandit Sitanath Mishra, who embraced him affectionately. It appeared to Benu as if a forlorn father had once again been reunited with his lost son. Benu looked at the black-board outside the headmaster's office wherein were painted in bold white letters the names of students who had won scholarships after having passed Matriculation examination with distinction. The first name on the Board—the Roll of Honour—was that of V. Viswanathan. Almost fifty years later Benu came to know about him. He became an I.C.S. and later a Secretary in the Government of India. He eventually became the Governor of a Province. It was a matter of gratification that a boy from downtown Waini would climb to dizzy heights in after-life.

For two days Benu moved about Naulakha on his cycle. Images after images flitted before his eyes—the hospital, the polo ground, the dairy, the cemetery, the sprawling forest of bamboos, the rectangular-shaped hostel, the river front, the recreation club, the river jetty and above all the sombre-looking jungle which they called Bairia Dhaf. He stood before the quarter which had been his home and where many a dramatic events had taken place. Thoughts came in a flash about his sisters, Radha, Sita, and Shobha. About his brothers—Dada, Khokun, Sine and Mona. About his nephews Babla and Kamal. Some he might see again and some others would remain only etched in memory. and those misty faces now faded with time, Bhute, Vidyanath and Priyaranjan. He'll miss them for ever as he has missed his mother during all his waking hours. While standing before the derelict Naulakha beyond the Burhi Gandak, Benu felt an irresistible urge to see Sujata, the timid companion of his, who had accompanied him on many an exploit. Their last meeting was under the dome of the ill-fated building when Sujata had quietened his tremulous frame and acted as the benign mother. Basically all girls are mothers or mothers-in-the-making, Benu thought. Or else how could

Sujata play the part which she did on that fateful day before his *upanayan* ceremony. Almost absent-mindedly Benu turned his cycle towards Mahmuda, beyond Waini bazar.

Babu Ramanand Mishra was delighted to see Benu. "Well, Benu, how're you?" he asked. "Nice uncle. Where's Sujata" Benu enquired. Sumitra Devi had heard the cycle bell. She came out and kissed Benu on the forehead. "You've grown taller, Benu. How long are you staying?" she asked. "I'm leaving for Muzaffarpur tomorrow. Then after my examination I might go to Delhi." Sumitra Devi told Benu that Sujata was in Darbhanga and she often wrote and enquired about him. "I hope you'll come again, Benu, to see us all. Sujata takes her Matriculation examination next year," Babu Ramanand Mishra told Benu.

That day Benu stayed for lunch with Mishraji. During the course of talk Mishraji mentioned to Benu that he would like to celebrate Sujata's marriage in early 1937. "Have you selected the groom," Benu asked. "Yes. He's related to you, Benu, being the son of your uncle, Rambilas Banerjee of Muzaffarpur."

"Amitabha Bhैया! that'll be grand. I wish I could attend the marriage". Benu then took leave after bowing to Mishraji and Sumitra Devi.

Next morning he was pedalling his bike towards Muzaffarpur.

XXVIII EPILOGUE

Afternoon in Waini. The month was November. The year was 1937. A thin haze was hovering over the Burhi Gandak. The pebbled road skirting the river was mostly deserted. At some distance from the water tank, precariously perched near the river front, stood the huge edifice which was known as Naulakha. It stood like a ghost in the vast stillness of the sprawling Institute ground now overgrown with weeds and shrubs. Not a soul was there. Silence reigned supreme. Sujata clung to her husband Amitabha, who was driving the car. He had come all the way from Darbhanga, where he was a doctor in the Raj hospital, to meet his in-laws. This was in fact his first visit to this part of the country-side after his marriage in February, 1937. Sujata was unusually excited. She longed to see the Naulakha and the campus, the contours of which were all too familiar to her. "Well, we'll drive round the Institute before proceeding to Mahmuda," she suggested to Amitabha, who didn't mind a small detour. "Look, that's the dome of the Institute. There under the dome we had stood together—Benu and I," Sujata said to Amitabha. "And there Benu had a sort of fit. He had felt as if the building was shaking. A strange premonition". Then she remembered something and blushed. She did not tell how she had caressed Benu seated on her lap, how she had brought him to normalcy by pressing his lips with her own.

"I wonder what's happened to Benu. Do you know anything, dear" Sujata asked her husband who was driving slowly round the dark derelict Institute, lying across the vastness of the playground, like a giant mammoth from another clime."

"No," Amitabha said. "Perhaps you are unaware that Benu's brother, Shibdas, died suddenly at Calcutta where he was taken from Delhi. The family was again rudderless." "How sad," Sujata said. "I knew Benu's brother. He had also come to our house. Moreover, he had helped father a great deal during his stay in the hospital. He was a very amiable person. Let's have a look at the quarter where Benu stayed with his brother." "And where I had chanced to meet you on the day of marriage of Benu's sister." Amitabha chipped in. Sujata blushed. The memory of that day flashed before her mind's eye.

It was not difficult to locate the house where Benu had lived with his family members. The rows of quarters were still there but they were empty. Seeing the *tagar* trees in front of a quarter Sujata said excitedly: "Look, that's the quarter where Benu lived. He used to climb the tree and pluck the *tagar* flowers which had a fine fragrance in them." Amitabha

laughed. "You're still carrying that fragrance. That's why I feel impelled to hover around like the honey bee on a buttercup". "You're incorrigible," Sujata frowned. "Now, sir, will you take me to Mahmuda so that I may give a surprise to Ma and Babuji." "Certainly," Amitabha said as he turned the vehicle on the road towards Mahmuda.

At Mahmuda Babu Ramanand Mishra lay reclining on an easy chair. Sumitra was seated on another chair by his side. It was dusk. The glow of the afternoon sun had irradiated the entire countryside. Soon it would be dark and a pall of mist would hover over the Burhi Gandak. Ramanand Mishra was now in his late forties. There were streaks of grey, in his once abundant growth of black hair. His looks were sad and his eyes lacked the youthful lustre. "Look Sumitra," Ramanand said, "the Mahmuda of my dream is dead. I wanted to live in this village of mine and do something to alleviate the miseries of the people. Isn't that what Swami Vivekananda had taught us? I still remember those lines of his: 'If in this hell of a world, one can bring a little joy and peace even for a day into the heart of a single person, that much alone is true. This I have learnt after suffering all my life; all else is mere moonshine.' I wanted to bring in joy but it turned into misery. Not that we human beings are responsible for all the sorrows, all the misfortunes. Who could envisage a cataclysm like the earthquake? Who could think of the uprooting of the entire population following the devastation of the Naulakha? All our able-bodied workers have gravitated to the towns in search of job. Only the aged and the infirm are hanging around. What's left in Mahmuda is an empty shell".

"Why do you worry dear," Sumitra said. "You think of yourself as the *karan* (the cause); why do you forget that you're only an instrument? Shall I remind you what Swamiji himself had said in another context!

'You cannot help anyone, you can only serve; serve the children of the Lord, serve the Lord Himself, if you have the privilege. If the Lord grants that you can help any one of his children, blessed you are; do not think too much of yourselves.'

So you should rid your mind of the notion that you wanted to do some thing but unseen elemental forces thwarted all your plans, demolished your dreams. Time doesn't stop. Nor do ideas melt into thin air if they have the backing of faith. As Swamiji had said great work requires great and consistent effort for a long time. If you're not able to accomplish what you wanted, other people will come and build. We will grow old but a new generation will come and take over. Your unfinished work might still be finished by..."

Before Sumitra could complete her sentence there was a hooting of horn. A car pulled up before the garden gate. "Look, they've come. What a pleasant surprise".

Sujata got down from the car and embraced her mother. Babu Ramanand Mishra fondly embraced Amitabha.

"Sumitra, you're right. The new generation has come here, in Mahmuda. We'll build again. Perhaps a new edifice will arise at the place where the Naulakha stood".

As Ramanand Mishra escorted his son-in-law to the inner apartments, an invisible bird cooed at its sweetest in a full-throated voice.

